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THE DETECTIVE TRIO WERE BEHIND THE SAD FACED GIRL'S KEEPERS AS THEY MADE THEIR WAY TO THE FERRY.

OR,

How the City Buzzards Were Brought In.

BY J. C. COWDRICK,
AUTHOR OF "BROADWAY BILLY" NOVELS, ETC.

CHAPTER I.

ON THE HOMEWARD TRAIL.

"SWEET percaters—ten in a bill!"

"Well, what is it this time, Billy?"

"This settles it, Skinny, for sure. The jig is up."

"Call me James, if you please, William. But what is it? Let's hear it, for I guess we can stand it; hey, Roger?"

"I opine we kin, lad. You are big enough, and I'm sartainly old enough and tough enough,

so I guess he kin unwind ther burden of his distress without any danger."

In their hotel at Denver; Broadway Billy, Skinny, and Roger Watts.

Billy had just received a telegram, the cause of his emphatic exclamation.

Skinny and the old ranger were eager to learn what it contained.

"Well, my gay and festive partners, the diffikilty is just this: Here's a telegram saying my poor old mother is very sick, and urging me to cut short my sojourn and hasten home."

"Great ginger!" cried Skinny. "Is that so, Billy?"

"Yes, frail youth; it is so."

"And you're goin'?"

"Sure! When mammy calls I always says 'Here!'"

"Hoo-ray!" yelled Skinny, jumping up and dancing around the room wildly. "I tell ye I'm glad of that, Billy. Not glad your mammy's sick, but glad we're going home. I have had more than enough of this cavoortin' around."

"Well, I don't know but I'm ready to go myself," confessed Billy. "I did want to stop over in the different cities on the way, though. But, no matter; I can take another trip some time and make up for it. Yes, we must start as soon as we can. But, Rover, what are you looking so glum about?"

This was the old ranger, who was looking rather sad and downcast.

"Well, lad, I war jest a-thinkin', that's all. If you two are goin' ter pick up and strike out fer ther East, of course, that means partin' with me, and I've come ter like ye so well that, hang me, ef I don't bate ther idee of losin' yer company. I'll be lonesome."

"Sweet pertaters! What are you talkin' about, old man? Isn't your own home in New York State? And wasn't you goin' there, anyhow? You'll go with us, and stop over with us in New York for a visit before we let you go, and don't you forget that! You are going right along with us, you bet."

The old ranger cheered up at once.

"Well, ef that's the case," he answered, "thar's no use cryin' over the partin' jest yet."

"Course not. So, mom is sick, is she? I hope she ain't bad, and I don't believe she is, either, for I think I smell a rat in this thing."

"Do ye, Billy?"

"Yes, I do. I have a sneaking idea that it is only a trick to get us home. But, it won't do to act on that thought and not go."

"No, I should say not, for you can't tell how bad off she is, Billy, and it would be awful if she should die before you get home. I have often thought of that, and the same of my poor old mother, too."

"You're a dutiful son, Skinny, and your heart is in the right place—or at any rate I s'pose it is; you've got so fat there is no telling anything about your inner workings any more. There was a time when I could tell whether your heart, lungs, gizzards, and so forth, were in good working order or not."

"Get out. Roger, he's talkin' to hear himself now."

"Oh! but it's the fact," Billy urged. "You remember how thin he was the day you saw him for the first time, Roger; eh?"

"Perfectly well, me son. I wouldn't want ter see him any thinner than he was then."

"No, I should think not. Well, all I had to do was to shake him, and I could hear his inner organs rattle around like dice in a box. Fact. And I could tell by the sound of them whether they were all right and in good working order or not. Once in a while it was necessary to inspect a little closer than that, and then I'd hold him up to the light and look through him. Why, he was so thin—"

"Oh! give us a rest," cried Skinny. "What time do we have to start?"

Billy, while talking, was already consulting a time-table, and was able to answer the question promptly.

"We've got just one hour and twenty minutes," he said. "Come, we shall have to hustle ourselves to get there. Time and steam don't wait worth a cent in these latter days of get-up-and-hump."

"And it will take us the twenty minutes to get over to the Seventeenth-street Station," added Skinny.

And at once he began to make preparations for a "b'iled" shirt.

"We'll shorten things up a bit," said Billy. "I'll go right down to the office and order a hack to take us over, bag and baggage, and we'll have lots of time then to pack our Saratoga."

"That's about the proper thing," agreed Skinny.

"And what am I goin' ter be doin'!" asked the old ranger.

"Be putting on your purple and fine linen, the same as Skinny," directed Billy in all earnestness.

"Mebby I'd better be lendin' him a hand," suggested Roger, with a wink. "He is gettin' so fat I think he'll have a hard time to make out alone."

Skinny growled something about being able to help himself, he guessed, and Billy went out laughing, leaving them to have it out between themselves, for there was little time for play.

Skinny had been taking on flesh and fat by the hour, seemingly. Ever since his long sickness in the mountains he had been gaining, and now he was really larger and heavier than Billy. Indeed he weighed closer to two hundred than to one hundred pounds, and was no longer recognizable as the "Skinny" of old.

As soon as Billy was gone, he and Roger set about preparing for their trip.

Skinny was overjoyed at the prospect of seeing home again, after his long absence, and about the same feeling animated the old ranger.

They were hard at work when Billy returned, and at once he fell in with them in the necessary work, changing clothes and packing up; and it was no easy task, for they had a big stock of personal effects.

"Well, it is all right," Billy remarked. "The hack and extra wagon will be here in time to make connection."

"The extra wagon?" queried obese Skinny, wonderingly. "What do you want with an extra wagon, Billy?"

"What do we want with it? Do you suppose there is a hack in Denver big enough to take me and Rover, and the baggage, and *you* besides? The extra wagon is for you, of course."

"Now you see here, Billy Weston," cried Skinny, stopping with his head and one arm in his shirt, "if you begin that business I'm not goin' to travel with ye, that is all. I had enough of it when I was thin, and I don't want any more of it now."

"Pshaw! you are too particular," placated Billy. "Now that you are bigger, you ought to be able to stand it all the better. Besides, it is a change, and there won't be so many chestnuts for you to juggle with. Never mind, though; I will let up for now."

Skinny growled, and after some little straining managed to get into his shirt, though it was a close fit.

At last the trunk was packed and roped, their other bundles were done up and secured, and they were ready. A porter was called, the trunk was taken down, and after it went the lads and their old friend.

Bidding good-by to their acquaintances at the hotel, they set off, and as they had time enough Billy called a halt at the Police Headquarters, where he ran in to take a proper leave of the friends he had made there. All expressed regrets at losing him so soon, and cordially invited him to come again.

Arriving at the station, Billy made it his business to get the tickets, which he made sure were via Kansas City, Chicago and Philadelphia.

It had been his intention and desire to stop over at these, and other cities, but it was now impossible, and he secretly made up his mind that he would pay them a visit later on.

They started, and as our story has not to do with the journey, it may be passed over hastily, or at any rate until Philadelphia was reached.

Passing through the different cities *en route*, Billy looked back at them regretfully.

There was no help for it, however; duty called.

Finally, after some days and nights of weary riding, they crossed the Schuylkill River and rolled into the Broad Street Station, Philadelphia.

It was early morning, and Billy and his friends had enjoyed their best night's sleep since leaving Denver, and they were up and dressed and feeling in first-rate condition. There was a wait here, and they were glad to get out and stretch their legs.

"Thank goodness we are on the home stretch, anyhow," Billy cried. "Come, my gay and festive pards, and we'll see if our stomachs and pocketbooks will stand another railroad meal. This is to be the last. If nothing happens we'll dine in dear old Gotham."

"And if nothing happens I'm going to dine there for a good many days to come," declared Fatty-Skinny. "I wasn't cut out for a rover, and I'm going to stay at home after this. I have had enough of traveling to last me all the rest of my natural days, I think. How is it with you, Rover?"

"Waal, me son, my years are beginnin' to grow hefty on me shoulders, and I think whil I git settled down now I'll pass my days in comfort, with now and then a leetle tramp in ther woods with dog and gun, mebbey."

They found their way to the restaurant and bolted a really excellent breakfast; after which Billy sought a telegraph office.

He sent word to his mother they were nearing home, telling her the hour they would probably arrive, and bidding her have Skinny's mother at the house to meet them. Then they had to run to catch the departing train.

"Now for home!" exclaimed Skinny, who could hardly contain himself. "I can't get there soon enough, now."

"There is no foolishness about this rate of moving, anyhow," averred Billy. "I guess we'll get somewhere, in the course of a day or two."

They were on one of the "flyers," now, and the old ranger was holding fast to the seat and looking out at the window with bulging eyes. They had done some lively traveling before, but this capped it all—sixty miles an hour, it seemed to him.

"Smoke o' Gittysburg!" the old man ejaculated, "but this is what I call goin'. I hope nothin' won't bu'st till we git thar."

Billy laughed, and hilariously enjoyed the situation.

After a time his attention was drawn to some passengers who had seats a little distance ahead of theirs. There were two men, two women, and a young lady of perhaps eighteen years.

The more Billy gave attention to them, the more it grew upon him that something was not altogether right. His "detective fever" began to make itself felt, but for a long time he said nothing to his companions about it. He wanted to be sure of his ground, if possible, before he drew their attention to the matter. But the longer he waited the higher grew the "fever," and finally he could hold in no longer.

CHAPTER II.

BILLY SCENTS A MYSTERY.

"SWEET pertaters!" he at last exclaimed, in subdued tone.

"What now?" demanded Fatty. "That means somethin', I know well enough."

"Hain't forgot nothin', have ye, son?" queried the old ranger. "Shell I git off and run back after et?"

"If you could run back and get me a pint o' brains, I'd say go, by all means," was Billy's ironical response. "As most o' folks like ter hold fast to the limited supply they happen to have, though, that wouldn't be any use."

"What has got hold of ye, anyhow?" demanded his pard. "Seems to me I ketch a sign of defective fever about your eyes. Is it that? If it is, fer the love of goodness keep it down till we git safe in New York. Then you can let yourself loose just as soon as you want to."

"Skinny," Billy whispered, "you have hit it the first shot."

"Great ginger! I have been hopin' and prayin' all the way along that you wouldn't see anything to set ye off, and I was sure I'd get ye home safe, but— What is it, anyhow?"

"I was rather in hopes myself that I'd get home without any spell on the way," rejoined Billy, "but it's no use. It is on me, and on me bad, too. It is gettin' higher all the time, and it'll soon be so ragin' hot you won't be able to hold me."

"But, lad, what is et?" from the ranger.

"Tell us what it is," urged his fat pard. "I don't see anything."

"That's because your skin is thicker than mine, and you are not so sensitive; and then Roger is getting old, and his sight isn't what it used to be. When he was my age—"

"Shut right up!" interrupted Skinny. "Tell us right out, or don't say another word about it."

"My! but you are somebody since ye got big, ain't ye! But, you are right, all the same, and I'll put ye onto it right away. Do you see these folks ahead of us here?"

"Yes," answered Skinny, "of course I see!"

"I sight 'em," the ranger supplemented.

"Well, they are my game, or I'm no Solomon!" Billy announced.

Fatty-Skinny and Roger Watts took a long and close look at the persons in question, but could see nothing to arouse Billy's suspicions or interest.

One of the men was about fifty years of age, evidently, and looked something like a sleek, well-fed preacher. He had a "smooth" look, that bespoke his eminent respectability in every fold and wrinkle of his coat.

He wore a high hat that had no flaw in its shiny nap; his hair, black and silver mixed, was neatly cut behind and smoothly brushed; he had a high all-around collar, and his black broadcloth coat fitted him as neatly as though it had grown upon him naturally.

His back was toward our trio, but now and then a side view of his face was had, when he would glance at his companion on the same seat, and it was seen that he wore a pair of gold-rimmed glasses, and had a chin whisker. This man appeared to be the head of the party, for he held the tickets for himself and the others.

Skinny and Roger could find no fault with him.

Beside this man was seated a woman who was naturally taken to be his wife. She was a person of forty, if appearances counted, and dressed in keeping with the man's elegant attire. She was topped off with a costly bonnet, joy of the feminine heart! and had a gorgeously black-beaded cape. The sleeves of her dress, one of which could be seen, showed that garment to be of black satin.

Her hair was mostly dark, but was considerably threaded with white, and her wrinkles, when her face was occasionally seen in profile, summed her years to the number mentioned, at least. Her natural skin was yellowish, but her face was seen to be painted and powdered almost to the bloom of youth. A pair of diamond earrings of no mean size sparkled and flashed constantly with every jar or movement. She looked to be as eminently respectable as the man.

Neither were Billy's "pards" able to detect anything wrong about her.

These persons were seated three seats distant, the two between being unoccupied, save for one old lady in the one nearest them.

The next seat beyond had been turned, and the persons occupying that were facing Billy and his companions. The ranger and Skinny, by the way, occupied the seat just ahead of Billy.

The two persons occupying the reversed seat were both women, or one woman and the young lady who has been mentioned. The latter sat nearest the window, and her face was sad and her eyes exhibited traces of weeping. She was a pretty girl, but was very plainly dressed.

Her companion was a woman of middle age, with a hard, harsh visage. Her eyes, particularly, had an evil glint, and her whole appearance was coarse. She was clad in a most untasteful way, with a bonnet that might once have been vulgarly "loud," but now had a forlorn and slattern appearance sad to behold. She was strangely out of place in such well-dressed company.

But, even here, Skinny and Roger did not allow their imagination to play any part, and saw nothing wrong.

When Billy called their attention to the fifth personage of the party, however, it was different. This was a man who sat on the next seat beyond.

He was a brutal-looking, low-browed fellow, with a stubby beard and mustache that did not add anything to his beauty. He was sitting with his back to the side of the car, and covering the whole seat.

At first Skinny and the ranger had not counted him as one of the party with the other four, but now that Billy drew their attention to him, they saw he belonged to the same set. He was sitting side-face to them, and occasionally his evil eyes looked in their direction.

"Well, what do you think now?" Billy demanded.

"I don't like ther face of that feller, anyhow," admitted the ranger.

"Same with me," assured Skinny. "If anything is wrong, he is the rooster you have got your eye on, Billy."

"He is one of 'em, that's so," agreed Billy, "but the king-pin of the bunch is the sleek, polished chap in the dicer and gold lookers. Don't get excited now, and don't give 'em any more attention."

"Et ain't possible!" ejaculated the ranger.

"Why, he's a Bible patrol, or I'm a chicken."

"Don't bet all your money on that," Billy cautioned. "All isn't gold that glitters, and everything isn't a preacher that looks like one."

"Oh, you are allus looking for a mare's nest," growled Skinny. "How do you know he isn't what he seems to be?"

"Sweet pertaters!" Billy exclaimed at that. "I am not denyin' that he ain't what he seems ter be; I'm only too certain that he is just what he seems to be, and nothing else."

"A sky pilot?" from the ranger.

"Nixey, McGinnis! He's a polished rascal, or I miss my pumpkin."

Roger and Skinny stole another glance at the man, and shook their heads. It seemed they could not agree with Billy in this.

"Stop lookin' at 'em," Billy cautioned again, "for we don't want that ugly customer to get onto the fact that we are sizing them up. Give me your 'tention, and I'll tell ye— Hal did ye see that?"

They had seen it, and were able to appreciate Billy's grounds for suspicion. The conductor had just entered the door, and the rough, brutal fellow was seen to give the girl's head a jog with his arm. At the same time the polished man leaned forward and whispered a word to her, while the woman beside her moved nearer.

"Great ginger!" exclaimed Skinny, "I don't know but there is something in it, Billy, after all."

"I know there is something in it," Billy averred. "My blood is fairly beginning to boil, and the fever is creeping right up to the top notch. They are my game, sure pop!"

"What do you think is wrong, my son?" inquired the ranger. "What do ye make out of et all?"

"I haven't made et out, yet," answered Billy. "That is the reason the fever is raging so. When I do I'll let you know all about it."

"No; but what is et ye spect? That's what I meant ter ask ye."

"I'll tell ye," returned Billy, speaking guardedly. "I have had my eyes on them for some time, and the longer I study them the less I know. The first thing that made me notice 'em was the fact of that nasty-lookin' woman riding face to face with such a well-dressed couple."

"That's so, when ye come ter think of et," assented the ranger.

"Then," Billy went on, "I got onto the fact that she is holding fast to one of that girl's hands, and that the girl has been crying. There's two big drops in her eyes now, after that scoundrel poked her with his arm that time— No, don't look now, for he is looking this way. He's an ugly customer, I'll bet on that."

"He'll be a first rate fellow to keep out of the way of," assumed Skinny.

"But he is going to find me in his way, if he is up to any rascal work with that girl, and I give you notice of that now," declared Billy, firmly.

"He'll kill ye; he looks like it," Skinny warned.

"Mebbe he would if he got the chance, but I'll try to keep him from getting the chance. No matter, I'm going to know more about them before I know less. But, to tell you the rest of it. If my thinker isn't out of order, and I don't believe it is, I have sized it up pretty close. This preacher-looking man is the chief rascal, and the young woman is the victim. The evil-faced man and woman are the tools who are doing his villain's work for him. What do you say to that?"

It was Roger Watts who responded.

"Now that I git ther same look at et that you do, Billy," he said, "hang me ef it don't 'pear so. But, mebbey et's all right, mebbey ther gal is sick, or somethin', and they are takin' care of her—"

"Nixey, McGinnis! They don't poke sick girls over the head, do they? They don't make prisoners of 'em, do they? Preachers and prize-fighting ruffians don't ride arm in arm as a general thing, do they? There's more to it than that, Rover, and I'm going to know what it is."

"How are you going to find out?" asked his fat confederate.

"Why, trail them, of course!"

"But, you can't do that. We have got to go home as soon as we get to New York, and you will have to let this case drop."

"Skinny, I am 'shamed of ye. I couldn't never forgive myself if I did, and should ever hear that this girl had come to-grief when I might have boosted her out of her diffikilty."

"But, your sick mother!" urged the other.

"Skinny, I love my mom right up to the chin, and I'm going to her just as soon as business will permit; but, I can't desert beauty in distress, nohow, and you must not expect it of me. I am only human, and when the detective fever gets hold of me the way it has hold of me now, I might as well give right up. You know Broadway Billy."

CHAPTER III.

HOT UPON THE DOUBLE TRAIL.

So was the matter settled, as far as Broadway Billy was concerned; yet, it was one which

had its unpleasant features, and he wished heartily he could have reached home without any new case to draw his attention from the duty he owed his mother.

But, he had spoken the truth; it was simply impossible for him to think of giving up the case, or what promised to be one, and allow the young woman to be taken off he knew not where, possibly into some deadly peril from which nothing would save her if he did not obey the instinct that had spoken to him.

One thing he partly regretted, and that was that he had telegraphed to his mother. Had he not done that, she would not be expecting him at any certain hour, and a little delay would not worry her any.

Her reported sickness did not worry him greatly, for he was suspicious that it had not been very serious. Her letters had been full of wishes for his return, and he felt that a slight illness had been taken advantage of to telegraph for him.

Still, he could not be sure of this, and hence was not by any means as easy in mind as he might have been.

Seeing that Billy was fixed in his resolve, Skinny suggested that he and the ranger go on to the house at once, and tell them he, Billy, would be along later.

Billy could not agree to that, either, however. He wanted to be in at the first welcome home, and not come in as an after edition, as he expressed it. That was not to his liking at all.

"Then how are we going to fix it?" demanded Skinny.

"We'll have to stick together till we hole the game, that's the only way out of it I can see," Billy answered.

"And your mother mebbey on her deathbed, and prayin' you'll only hurry up and get there 'fore she has to give up the ghost and go flittin' across the dark—"

"Shut up!" cried Billy, "or your ghost will go flittin' before you know it. You allus come in with that wet blanket of yours and chill a fellow to the bone. Ugh! you have made me shiver."

"Which proves your conscience isn't easy," Skinny assumed.

"It's mighty sure it wouldn't be easy, if I didn't look into this matter and see whether or not this lamb is in the power of wolves or not," cried Billy.

"Ther lad is right," the old ranger agreed with him. "Et won't take long ter find out somethin' about 'em, and a little while won't make much difference. It will be laid to ther 'count of a late train."

Billy urged the matter with Skinny until he had finally won him over.

They had by this time seen enough more of the suspected persons to assure themselves that they were all against the helpless girl.

The girl was in their power, and afraid of them, and her distress of mind was plainly shown in her woe-begone face. At times tears would start, and she would put up her free hand to hide her emotion.

That one hand was held by the woman in the seat with her, could no longer be doubted, and more than once the man behind her was seen to whisper something in her ear, while the sleek gentleman now and then leaned over to say just a word. And they seemed to do this especially whenever the conductor passed through.

So passed the time until the train neared its destination.

Finally the end of the long, long ride came, and the train rolled down from the Jersey City Heights to the ferry.

Billy had cautioned Skinny and the old ranger not to pay much attention to the suspected persons, but to let him do the watching in his own way, so they could not be detected at it.

During this final short stretch of the run, the passengers all prepared to leave the train, those who had not already made their preparations, and among others the ones upon whom Billy had his watchful eyes. And it was while they were doing so that Billy made a new discovery.

This was, that one hand of the pretty but sorrowful girl was secured to the wrist of the woman beside her by means of a handcuff!

He had only a glimpse of this, true; but that was enough, and it brought to his lips his pet ejaculation.

"Sweet pertaters!" he cried. "I knew it!"

The woman in the fine hat and satin dress helped the woman opposite her to button her cape at the throat, and a shawl was pinned around the shoulders of the girl.

Into the station rumbled the train; there were some fitful thumps and jars, and the panting

engine stood still; then out poured the passengers, everybody in haste to get somewhere.

Billy and his companions were slower than the others, making a show of getting their effects fished up from under their seats at the last moment, but really killing time to let the suspected ones go out of the car ahead of them.

They, however, were in no hurry either, and it was not until the car was getting emptied that they rose to go out.

Billy had his eyes on them, while pretending not to look their way at all.

He saw the hard-visaged woman give a jerk at the arm of the girl, while the man caught hold of her other arm and lifted her to her feet with no gentle effort. At this the girl broke into tears, sobbing aloud.

"Shut up that, now!" Billy heard the man hiss at her. "If ye don't, you'll be sorry, that's all."

At the same time the elegantly dressed couple glanced around to see if any one was paying attention to the scene.

No one appeared to be, and, in fact, no one was, save Billy.

The girl gave another stifled sob or two, and all went forward and passed out of the car behind the crowd.

Billy and his partners sought the opposite door, and stepped down to the long platform about the same time the suspects were getting out.

Hence, the detective trio were behind the sad-faced girl's keepers as they made their way to the ferry, and did not put themselves in the way of being seen at all, though Billy did not lose sight of any of the party while crossing the ferry.

On the New York side the usual rush was made, and here Billy and his "pards" were in the front ranks. Billy had a reason for wanting to be the first off, if he could, for there was no chance for the party to escape him now until they had emerged to the street.

Making their way out to the line of howling cabmen, Billy quickly selected one and hustled the ranger, Skinny and their bundles into his vehicle, but paused himself to talk with the Jehu.

"Well, what's your terms these days, Patsey?" he asked. "Do you sock it on as largely as ever when you get a chance?"

The cabby looked at Billy in amazement.

"You have got the best of me," he declared.

"You seem to know me, but hang me if I know you. No; I never sock it on; only the regular rates, you know. But, where to?"

"Yes, I know you, you bet!" Billy laughed.

"I know you skin a hayseed every time you get hold of one, if he will let you. But, be easy, for I'll pay you well enough. You see, Patsey, old socks, I've got a diffikilty on hand—"

"Great mackerel!" cried the astounded cabman, "if it ain't Broadway Billy!"

"Nobody else," Billy assured. "But, keep it still now!"

The cabman had made a grab at Billy's hand and was trying to wring it off, or seemed to be.

"Easy, now," cautioned Billy, and he spoke in tones of caution. "I want you to follow a certain party who are coming off this boat. Don't let them suspect it, but don't lose them. Let's step around to the other side, and I'll put you onto them."

"Still up to your old tricks, I see, Billy," the cabman remarked, grinning, as he followed Billy's lead around the rear of his vehicle. "But, you know Patsey, and he'll follow them if they go to the moon."

Partly out of sight, Billy watched, and presently the party came off and out upon the street.

The well-dressed couple were ahead, while the other man and woman, with the girl, were following a few steps behind.

Billy indicated them carefully to the cabman, and together they watched to see what they intended doing. They had not long to remain in uncertainty.

The man of the clerical appearance pushed right forward to a carriage, one of the larger sort, and as soon as the driver sprang to his call he hurried the woman, the man, and the girl into it.

He closed the door upon them instantly, and made terms with the driver, paying him in advance for the services he was to render.

"That done, he and his woman companion crossed the street, arm in arm, and went up toward Broadway.

"Sweet pertaters!" exclaimed Billy, "this means a division of force, right off, quick. Patsey, you follow the carriage, and be sure you don't miss the place the game gets out at. Skinny is inside— Don't faint; no time to explain

now; he has got fat. He is inside, and he will take note of things. See that there's no mistake. No time to waste. You tell him. Ta-ta!"

And with a wave of the hand Billy was gone, leaving the cabman and Fatty-Skinny to follow the other trail.

But, Billy knew his man, and knew it would be all right.

Hastening forward, Billy soon came within good distance of the man and woman he must follow.

They were going along arm in arm, models of propriety and goodness, and had he seen them thus for the first time he could not have doubted their priestly calling and goodly walk in life.

As it was, he could not help looking upon them as the sleekest pair of hypocrites he had ever seen in his life, and their every motion was in itself a declaration of their true characters. Billy was firm in his suspicion of them, and it would be hard to shake his faith.

When they reached Broadway they turned up that great thoroughfare, and ere very long entered a leading hotel.

"This is all right," said Billy to himself. "Now, if Skinny and Patsey don't make a mess of their part of it we will have them where the hair is short, and not a great deal of time lost either."

Giving them a little start, Billy entered the hotel too, and was at the right moment to see the man entering his name on the register.

Billy was well dressed, as we know, and looked what he really was, now, a young gentleman of our model nation, of sturdy, self-made men of every walk in life.

As the man had had his back to him all the way in the train, Billy had no fear of being recognized, so went boldly forward to the clerk's desk, and stood waiting, as if to be served next with hotel accommodations.

The man finished, exchanged some remarks with the clerk, and went away with one of the porters.

The moment he had gone Billy stepped to the register and read what he had put down. The entry was as follows:

"REV. B. GREENE GRACEAWAY, AND WIFE,
"Washington, D. C."

Billy had done well, and knew it. Whatever was to come of it, he had followed this pair to their present stopping-place, and was accordingly satisfied.

CHAPTER IV.

AT THE THRESHOLD OF HOME.

"WELL, what can I do for you?" the hotel clerk politely asked.

"I guess my uncle hasn't got here yet," Billy observed, taking another look up and down the page.

"Your uncle?" said the clerk. "What is his name?"

"Horace Hamperton, sir."

"No; no such name as that here, sir, was the polite information.

"Maybe he will be here before night. If he stops here, here is where I will put up, too. Good day, and thank you, sir."

"Good-day, sir."

Billy knew the fact that the hotel clerk is a power in the land, and was as polite to this one as a French cook to a liberal marketman. He might have occasion to call there again.

Going out, he sauntered up the street.

It was useless for him to think of finding Skinny and the old ranger now, and he could only await their arrival at the final destination, Billy's home.

"Sweet pertaters!" he said to himself, as he sauntered up the familiar street, "the fellow that said there is no place like home knew what he was talking about. There is only one city in the world, and its name is New York!"

He noted many changes, of course. When one goes away from home it is a signal for the place to take on changes as fast as possible until his return.

Suddenly he thought of the old corner where the old stand stood, and he was all eagerness to get there and see it again. Perhaps it was open, and either his mother or Mrs. Callahan would be there.

Pushing forward with eager haste he presently came in sight of it, and found it open for business as of old, with a lad in charge who was almost the counterpart of what Skinny had been about the time he first made his acquaintance.

It was a brother of the "Lean" Lieutenant, as Billy quickly recognized, who had been

pressed into service during the absence of the partners. Billy knew him more by his resemblance to Skinny than from any knowledge he had ever had of the boy, and knew he would never recognize him.

Stopping a little distance off, he took a survey of the stand before approaching nearer.

"Sweet pertaters!" he exclaimed under his breath, "I have been growing some sure enough. The place that knew me once will know me no more forever, by crackey! I have outgrown my small clothes as sure as I'm alive. I'm too big for the business, no use talking. But, I'm not sorry, for I'm edging on to twenty-one, now, and meant to drop out of it. Sweet pertaters!" he ejaculated again, "how little and mean it does look, anyhow! Ha, ha, ha! Why, when I had my eye on this stand, and the one ambition of my soul was to possess it, it looked as big in my eye as Stewart's big store. That is natural, I suppose."

Natural or not, Billy spent a moment in sad reflection. He saw himself as he was now, and realized that his boyhood days had gone forever.

It might yet be possible for him to play boy a little longer, but the fact remained that he was a man, or very near it.

While he stood there he saw some familiar faces, men who had been his customers, some of them, and was startled to find that he was as big in stature as most of them, and larger than some.

"It's no use, William," he said to himself. "You may kick up your heels and be frisky for a little while longer if you want to, but the grim fact is here that you are a pretty old boy, and your days of lugging a leather polisher's kit around on your shoulder are gone forever. No use your spilling any salt, sad tears over it, either. Sweet pertaters! I wonder if I am any nearer to gaining the confidence of Inspector Br— Ha, ha, ha! That has been the dream of my life, so far, but I guess I have almost graduated in my special line, and perhaps he would nod his head at me if I called around to see him. But, no more of this."

Bidding adieu to his dreams, he went forward to the stand.

Skinny's brother was on the alert for business at once, and made ready to display any of the articles in stock that might be called for.

"Is this the stand that used to be run by a lad named Broadway Billy?" the ex-gamin asked.

"Yes, sir," was the answer; "this is the place."

"Where is Billy now, do you know?"

"He has been away a long time, sir, but is 'spected home ter-day."

"The reason I ask," Billy explained, "I used to know his mother, and wanted to inquire where she lives. Can you tell me that?"

Yes, the lad could, and he did.

"Do you know whether she is well or not?" Billy next asked, and with some eagerness.

"Oh, yes, she is well, sir," was the assuring report. "She was sick a few days ago, but she is all right again now. You will find 'em makin' a great time over there to welcome Billy and my brother home."

"Your brother? Oh, yes, he was the shadow who used to be seen here when the day was clear and light strong enough. Oh! yes, I remember Skinny. Ha, ha, ha! How is he?"

The lad was looking at Billy curiously now.

"Oh, he was well the last we heard," he answered.

"And as thin as ever?"

"Thinner," the latter declared. "Mom is real worried about him, sir."

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Billy. "Oh! sweet pertaters! but this is too rich, or it will be when that dear skeleton falls upon his mother's collar bone and weeps his tears of joy all over her breastpin! Ha, ha, ha! Say, Jerry, you little rat, you don't know me, do you?"

"It must be Billy himself!" the lad gasped.

"Billy it is, bless your little heart! I could almost hug you for your brother's sake, for you look like he used to. I'll have to hug you, if I want to hug anybody, too, I guess, for he is past hugging now."

Billy had taken the little fellow's hand and shaken it warmly.

"Why, what's the matter with Skinny?" the lad asked, with a little of alarm in his tone.

"Oh, nothing, only he's got so awful thin now that there is nothing to hug," explained Billy; and then he went off into another fit.

"Come, you little terrapin," Billy presently ordered, "shut up shop and come along home with me and get a share of the good things you were telling me about. This is a holiday for the firm of Weston and Callahan."

"But, mom told me to stay here, and said she would send for me when Skinny come home."

"Never mind what your mom told you now," urged Billy. "Close up and lock up and come along. If there is anything to scold about I'll take the scolding. Get at it, now."

Jerry was glad enough to do it, and since Billy was one of the bosses of the business he did not hesitate any longer about obeying.

With Billy's help the stand was speedily closed, and taking Jerry by the hand they set out for Billy's home.

It was not a great distance away, and as they neared the place Billy saw and realized how truly poor and miserable his home was. He would better things in a short time, in this respect, he secretly declared.

As they drew near the house Billy saw a cab turn into the street a little distance above, and recognized the one in which he had left Skinny and the old ranger.

He had told his little companion where Skinny was, and now he exclaimed:

"Here he comes, now, Jerry. Hurry up, and we'll meet him at the door. But, don't make too much fuss till we get in the house, or folks will think you are crazy."

They reached the door about the same time that the cab drew up, and the driver greeted Billy with an exclamation.

"Here you are, hey?" he cried. "Well, we holed 'em, and if they ain't a p'izen lot, you can use me for a foot-wipe."

"I know they are," declared Billy. "Where did you hole them?"

"Why, at a miserable den of a house, No. — street. That poor girl is a prisoner, and only that I knowed you was on the track of 'em, I'd 'a' told the police."

"I'm glad you didn't do that. I and Skinny will take care of them, just as soon as we can now. Don't say a word about it. By the way, what do you think of Skinny now?"

Skinny and the old ranger had got out, and the driver took a survey of Skinny, a broad grin on his face.

"It ain't possible!" he cried.

Billy could hardly believe it was, either. Now that he saw Skinny here on familiar ground, and the picture of what he had been came to mind, it did not seem possible that this could be he.

"It don't seem possible, and that's a fact," he admitted, "but it is, all the same. Skinny, don't be too big to notice old friends. You know Patsey, don't you? Give him your little hand, now, like a man."

Whether it was Skinny or not, this was Billy, sure enough, and after a hearty laugh and a shaking of hands, the jolly driver drove off and left them.

Skinny was now making himself known to his gaping brother, who could not believe it possible that this monster could be the Skinny he had known only two short years ago.

"Now," Fatty-Skinny soon exclaimed, "let's go up."

"Hold on just one minute," requested Billy. "This is my castle, and not yours, you know, frail youth. I have a request to make of you."

"Well, what is it? Don't fool any now, but hurry up."

"All right; I'll rattle it out of me just as fast as ever I can. You see, it is some time since you have seen your mother, Skinny, and it will be too much of a shock for her to see you all at once, as it were. It will be too big a surprise, so to say. I want to go ahead and announce it to her, so she will be a little prepared for the great change in you."

"Do you mean that, Billy, honest?"

"Of course I do. Do you suppose I would stand here and chin to you if I didn't? Wouldn't I prance up the stairs like a frisky colt and hug my mother 'most to death, and never a thought about you, if I didn't love you? Come, what do you say to it?"

"Well, if you think it's best, why—"

"Of course it's best! Besides, I haven't got my life insured, and if we all go in together, and I say you are Skinny, your mother would light on me and brain me with anything she might lay her hands on. I don't want to take any risk. This is a serious thing, Skinny, and you must spare your mother all the shock you can. It will be great enough, goodness knows."

"Well, go ahead, then."

"There, that's sensible. You keep Jerry here with you, and follow on up in about two minutes, or less. I'll open the door when I want you to step in."

"All right."

"Don't forget. Now, Roger, you and me for it. I will lead the way and you follow right on behind and I'll introduce you to my mother."

It was evident that the women were not aware of their arrival, or they would have been out and down ere this, and Billy led the way up the stairs with light step.

CHAPTER V.

THE WELCOMING AND THE SURPRISES.

WHEN the door was reached, Billy touched the ranger's arm to enjoin silence, and for a moment he listened.

It was his mother's voice he heard first, and it gave him a thrill such as he had not felt in many a day. It was a thrill of joy, and he realized what it was to have so good and dear a mother.

"Oh! I know he will come home all right, Mrs. Callahan," she was saying. "My Billy has always been a good boy, he never told a lie, and he never touched a drop of drink; indeed, he does not even smoke. I wish all the boys in this city were like my Billy."

"Sure, it was a good b'y he was," responded the voice of Mrs. Callahan, "and Oi do believe he was dbe making av my Jimmie, so Oi do. It was only a thought Oi spoke out, Mrs. Weston, dhat maybe dhey would come home spoiled and not so good as dhey went away, but God forbid dhat. Me poor Jimmie! Oi am afraid he is comin' home to die, so t'in he is gettin'."

Billy was smiling from ear to ear as he listened to this innocent talk of the two old ladies, and he now knocked at the door.

Instantly all was hurry and confusion within, with many an exclamation, and the next moment Billy opened the door and sprang in, clasping his mother in his arms.

"Who!" screamed Mrs. Callahan, at sight of him; "sure it is a man he is now, so he is! And, phwere is me Jimmie, Billy? Phwere is me Jimmie?" And without waiting for a reply out into the hall she dashed.

It was dark there as compared with the room, and she ran plump against the old ranger, catching him in her arms with a whoop of joy and lifting him bodily into the room.

She was a powerful woman, this Mrs. Callahan, as strong as she was big and fat, and it was no effort for her to do this.

The moment she got the old man into the light where she could see him, however, she dropped him with another whoop.

This caused Mrs. Weston and Billy to unlock their embrace to see what was the matter, and Billy almost went into a fit then and there.

"I beg yer pardon, ma'm," the old ranger was saying, as, with bat off he made a bow, "but I guess I'm mistook fer somebody else. Billy, lad, jest interdoose me, and make me more ter home, will ye?"

As soon as Billy could speak he said:

"Mother, and you, Mrs. Callahan, this is our old friend Roger Watts, whom we have told you all about in our letters. It is the man who saved Skinny's life when he had the fever so bad, Mrs. Callahan."

"And may God bless ye fur dhat same, sor," Mrs. Callahan cried, as she in her turn made a bow. "But, phwere is me b'y, Billy? Phwere is he, Oi say? Sure, Oi took you to be him, sor, in dbe dark," to Roger.

"He is coming," said Billy, then. "You know, Mrs. Callahan, I have told you in my letters that he is getting thinner than ever, and he is really so changed that it is hard work for him to walk. He is coming, and will be here as soon as he can. You must not faint when you see him—"

"Oh! me poor b'y, me poor b'y!"

So the mother wailed, as she stood wringing her hands, so eager to see her son.

"Sure, Mrs. Weston, it is proud ye should be to have so big and foine a man to come home to ye, and me wid me poor Jimmie comin' home to die. Oh! it is too bad it is, so it is."

Billy had closed the door, and now he heard Skinny without.

"I guess he is coming now," he whispered. "Have a chair ready for him to sit down, mother. It is hard work for him to stand now."

"Oh! me poor b'y, me poor b'y!" wailed Mrs. Callahan again, in low tone so that Skinny himself might not hear.

"Do you think you can stand the shock now, Mrs. Callahan?" Billy whispered.

"Yis, yis, let me know dbe worst," the mother cried.

"Well, then, behold!"

With that Billy flung open the door and there stood Skinny in all the strength of health and all the glory of his two hundred pounds of flesh and fat.

"Merciful heavens!" gasped Mrs. Weston.

Mrs. Callahan, who had stood prepared to

cover her face with her hands, stood and simply stared in speechless amazement.

"Don't you know me, mother?" Skinny asked.

"Saints presarve me!" screamed the woman. "Is it possible it is me Jimmie! May dbe good angel furgive ye, Billy Weston, fur dbe sthory ye told me!"

With that Skinny jumped in, very much alive and quite able to stand, and caught his mother in his arms, or as much of her as he could get hold of, while she did the same by him.

Impossible to quote all that was said during the next minute or two.

Finally, after a long embrace, the woman pushed her son from her, and laying her hand on his head took a long look at his face. Then she rubbed his chubby cheeks, laughing as she did so. Then she walked slowly around him, taking a good long survey of him on every side.

While this was being done, Mrs. Weston, Billy, and the old ranger, all were enjoying the heartiest kind of a laugh.

"Well, Oi would never have belaved it, had ye told me in your letthers," she declared. "It is dbe most wonderful change Oi ever saw in me loife, so it is. Sure, Mrs. Weston, Oi have more av a b'y nor phwat you have!"

"You certainly have," Mrs. Weston had to acknowledge.

"That is the reason we did not tell you, Mrs. Callahan," said Billy. "We knew you would not believe it if we did, and so we thought we would let you see for yourself."

"But it was a m'ane thing av ye, Billy Weston, to be afther tellin' me how awful t'in me poor b'y had got, and havin' dbe heart av me all in a flurry."

To tell all that was said during the next hour, would be to leave no room for anything else, so it must be passed over hastily.

The two mothers could not keep their admiring eyes off their sons, and while Billy and Skinny told something of where they had been and what they had seen, they went about preparing a dinner.

The savings of many a day had been expended lavishly, to make this a feast, and, as Billy expressed it, the fatted calf had been killed in honor of the prodigal's return. The old ranger was made to feel at home, too, and needless to say the party was a joyous one.

Neighbors came in to welcome Billy home again, and there was a great time generally. Every now and again Mrs. Callahan would break out in a fit of laughing, as she looked at her son, and Billy would have some droll remark to make that would cause them all to roar. Skinny took it all in good part, since he could not well do anything else.

Billy said nothing about the business he had on hand until at dinner, when he made it known.

"Well, mom," he said, "you will have to let me off this afternoon, for I have got business on hand that won't be put off. After that is attended to I'll give you a whole week just to look at me and do nothing else."

"Business on hand?" the mother repeated.

"Yes; a detective diffiklty, and one that has got to be done right away or not at all."

"Now, Billy, that will not do, and I am not going to have it so," Mrs. Weston declared.

"What on earth have you got hold of so soon?" Billy told the whole story, and when his mother had heard it she was more willing for him to go ahead. Still, she suggested that he tell the police, and turn the case over to them.

"Nixey McGinnis!" cried Billy. "I don't give my bones to other dogs just now, mom. No; Skinny and I have got to attend to this, just to let folks know we have got home, and to keep our hand in. But, we'll soon wind it up, and then we are yours for a week."

Argument was useless.

When the dinner was over Billy and Skinny set out from the house, leaving the old ranger there to entertain their mothers with tales of the wild West.

This the old man was glad enough to do, for he declared New York was a trifle too big a place for him. And it goes without saying that he talked more about Billy and Skinny than about anything else.

Billy and Skinny set off in the direction of the old corner stand, which the "lean" lieutenant declared he was dying to see, and as they went along Skinny asked:

"Well, you found out who the man and woman was, eh, Billy?"

"Yes; and that is to say, I found out who they claim to be," Billy answered. "They claim to be a preacher and wife, from Washington."

"But you don't believe they are, eh?"

"Not a bit."

"Then they are rascals, jest as you said at first?"

"Yes, or I'm a Dutchman. I can see about as far up a dark alley as the next one."

"I know you can. Well, where are we going to take hold of this thing, and how are we going to begin to wind it up?"

"You holed the other safe enough, you told me."

"You bet we did, and they never looked at us once. Oh! they are a bad lot, sure."

"I know they are. Did they abuse the girl any more?"

"They abused her enough, with the woman yanking her along and the man giving her a push as they entered the house."

"Confound them!" Billy muttered. "I want to get a chance to pay that big bully back for all that. It makes me mad all over when I think of that girl in their hands."

"I hope you won't get into his hands, Billy, for I think he'd make short work of you."

"Oh, do you? Well, maybe he would, but you can safely bet I'd try to make it interesting for him, anyhow. Now, prepare to feast your eyes, Skin, for here is the old stand."

They were coming out to it now, from a cross street, and Skinny was eager to see the old spot once again.

It was soon in view, and immediately on beholding it Skinny stopped short.

"Great ginger!" he cried, "how it has shrunk up!"

Billy laughed.

"It isn't so much that," he declared, "as that you have expanded since you have been away. Why, Skinny, I'll bet you can't get behind it any more!"

"Pshaw! you don't think I'm an elephant, do you?"

"No; but I'll bet a quarter you can't. Come on and let's try it, just for the fun of it. If you can't, you'll have to look up new quarters, that is all."

They had brought the key with them, and unlocking the door, Billy threw up the lift and invited Skinny to step in.

Skinny went forward with all confidence, but he soon came to a stop. It was next to impossible for him to get behind the narrow counter. He grew red and drew back, and Billy enjoyed a hearty laugh.

"I give it up, Billy," he said. "It's no use. Besides, the place looks so small and mean now that I'll be glad to make a change. Come, let's attend to business."

CHAPTER VI.

IN A BOWERY BEER GARDEN.

THE same impression which had taken hold upon Billy had seized Skinny too; he was too big for the business. In his case this may be taken with a double meaning.

Locking the establishment up again, they turned away, but as they started to go Billy suddenly caught Skinny by the arm and detained him. As he did so he cautiously pointed, whispering:

"Do you see that pretty gentleman, Skinny?"

"Great ginger!" Skinny ejaculated, "it's him, sure enough!"

"Of course it is. Wonder who the young fellow is he's talking with? We are on the trail again, I guess, before we expected to be."

The man indicated was the man whom Billy had followed to the hotel, and who had there registered as Rev. B. Greene Graceaway. The person he was talking with was a young man, with a foppish air.

"No chance to hear what they say, I s'pose," observed Skinny.

"Too bad I'm not a boy again," mourned Billy. "With my kit on my arm I could slide right up and strike them for the contract of polishing their understandings."

"That dog is dead. We'll have to make the best of the matter as it is. If we can't listen we can watch, anyhow."

"Yes; but that don't satisfy. Come on, and we'll edge that way, and we'll be pretending to be looking for some sign or something or other."

Skinny agreed, and they moved toward the two men, not looking at them, but with their eyes fixed upon the buildings on the other side of the street and staring away like countrymen.

In a few moments they were near enough to overhear what was being said, and yet no notice had been taken of them. They were now with their backs to the men, their faces to the curb, and seemed deeply interested in their search for something.

"That looks like the building, right over

there," Billy was saying to Skinny, as they stopped.

"Yes, I think that's it," Skinny agreed.

Then no more was said for a moment.

"Then you think it is a sure thing, do you?" the younger man of the two under watch was saying.

"Yes, a sure thing, Robert," the elder made response. "She will not remain there long before she will consent to marry you, and then it will be all right."

"Women have stubborn wills, sometimes."

"That's true enough, but there is a way of breaking them."

"Well, I hope it will turn out as you say."

"We are going to make it turn out so, Robert. Then you will be in clover for the rest of your natural life."

"It is to be hoped so. I have been browsing in stibble long enough, I think. Well, shall I meet you there to-night?"

"Yes, at nine."

"What number did you say?"

The number was given, and Billy and Skinny at once recognized the number as that of the house where the girl had been taken.

The two conspirators parted company and went off in different directions.

"Sweet pertaters!" cried Billy, "that wasn't bad, eh, Skinny?"

"It was pretty good, I should say," was the response. "Which way now? Going to follow them?"

"We'll follow the new one. We have got the sleek rooster's headquarters all right, and need not trouble our heads about him just now."

So, after the young man they went, keeping him in sight.

The young man had, as said, a foppish air, and had also a dissipated look. A certain something about him, which the two detectives read at a glance, told them he was a Bowery sport and maybe worse.

"Now, Skinny, you can just bet your money on the bob-tailed nag that there is a diffikilty a-brewin' here," Billy remarked. "We have heard enough to give us some idea about it. This girl is being forced to marry that Bowery bum, for some reason or other, and from what was said I take it to be a money reason."

"That's it, dollars to dimes," agreed Skinny.

"And if that is the case, it is our business to slip in a little joker and nip their game right in the bud."

"Exactly."

"And we'll do it, too, or bu'st a buckle trying."

It seemed natural enough when the men turned in the direction of the Bowery, and the two "parda" so fresh from the Western wilds went right after him.

They were at home here, knowing every street as they did, and it seemed like old times to be on their own stamping-ground, as Billy expressed it.

When the man reached the Bowery he turned up that thoroughfare and proceeded for some distance, when he entered one of the leading "gardens" which there abound in all their glory of beer and blare.

"We are wid ye, McGulligan," remarked Billy. "Come right along, Skin, and we will follow him up. Remember, we are Bowery toughs for the present, regular 'dis and dat' boys. We'll have to buy something in here, too, but no need to drink 'it if we do, and of course we won't."

In they followed, and seeing their man about to sit down at a table, they played the same old dodge and took seats at the table just behind him.

Waiters were at their elbows at once, and Billy held up his fingers to indicate that two beers might be brought, and two mugs of the amber colored German enthusiasm were soon before them.

It is an old saying that, going to Rome one should do as Romans do; but here all the noble "Romans" were drinking and smoking, in which Billy and Skinny did not follow example. They toyed with the stuff that had been brought them, but not once was it put to their lips.

At the table where their man had taken seat another fellow was already sitting at the time, and the two fell into conversation.

The first few words exchanged Billy and Skinny did not catch, being bothered with the waiter, but after that they were enabled to hear quite a good deal that was said.

"So, your prospects begin to brighten, do they, Rob?" the one said to the new-comer.

"Yes, Jake, there is now some show for me," was Robert's answer.

"You have seen the parson, then?"

"Yes; just left him."

"What's he say?"

"He is in high feather; thinks it's a sure go."

"And the angel?"

"She is here, too. The whole thing is working finely, and if we can only carry it out there will be no trouble."

"Not likely that any one will get out of it, eh?"

"No, not at all. Don't see how any one could. It has been managed finely all the way through."

"When are you going to know sure about it?"

"Maybe to-night."

"Going to see her, then?"

"Yes; and I guess the parson means to force things, too."

"Good for him, he knows when his nest is covered well. He means to line it, too, if he can."

"I'm willing he should, for it means a golden egg for me at the same time. And I don't believe you are going to kick, Jake."

"Say, Rob."

"Well?"

"Have you got any particular love for the parson?"

"Not a bit. What makes you ask that?"

"I was thinking whether you couldn't beat him at this game and collar all the stuff yourself."

"Hang it! I hadn't thought of that. How could it be done?"

"Oh, I don't know that it could be done; but it wouldn't do any harm to try it on."

"But, suppose it slips up, and the parson gets mad and won't come to time with me, what then?"

"Not much fear of that. You have too good a grip on him for that. If he does find it out he may make a good deal of fuss, and threaten a good deal, but that won't hurt you, and you can tighten the screws on him whenever you want to."

"That's so. But, how would you do it?"

"You say the girl objects to marrying you."

"Yes, flat."

"And yet she is in a dickens of a scrape all on account of it, being held a prisoner till she will marry or sign off."

"Yes."

"Well, couldn't you go to her in a secret way, and make a proposal to her? You to rescue her and get her out of the hands of the parson, on condition that she marry you?"

"I don't believe it would work."

"You don't know whether it would work or not. It won't cost much to try it, anyhow, and then you would know."

"That's so, too; but I wouldn't know how to go ahead with it."

"Then you are not much of a general, but a good soldier, it seems."

"You may be right; but, I'm satisfied to be a soldier, if the pay is as good as it promises to be here."

"Well, you can do as you please about that, of course, but I would play for the whole thing, if it was my game."

"How would you work it?"

"Why, go and see her, on the sly, and tell her you will get her out of the hands of her enemies if she will marry you."

"And see her lip curl with scorn that would make a chill run down your back, eh?"

"What if it did? You could stand that. Or, you might go with another tale, and so get her in your power and let the parson find her if he can."

"That would do no one any good. And, if she got away from me the fat would be in the fire sure enough."

"Oh, well, there is no use talking with you on that line, I see. You are satisfied well enough as it is."

"I think it's best to let well enough alone."

"Well, however it turns out, Rob, I want my money just as soon as you get your fingers on any of it."

"Oh! that will be all right; you know I mean to pay you."

"I know that I mean to see that you do, so don't forget that. By the way, you haven't told me where she is stored away."

"She's at No. — street. Burke Wedger and Mary Ann have her in charge, and you can bet high she won't get out of their clutches in a hurry."

"And you say you are going to try it to-night?"

"Yes; we are to be there at nine, and the parson will see what he can do then. I have my doubts about success so soon, but he seems to think it will work. Anyhow, I will do all I can to make a success of it, you bet."

CHAPTER VII.

ANOTHER SPLIT IN THE TRAIL.

TWO young women at this moment came along and joined them, and the important part of their conversation ended at once and they began a light run of nonsense with the women.

This gave Billy and Skinny a chance for a little talk, which Billy was eager to take advantage of.

"Skinny," he said, in a tone that could not be overheard, "this thing is going to b'ile up pretty soon, and unless we look out pretty sharp it is going to scorch before we can get it off the fire."

"What do you mean by that, Billy?" Skinny asked.

"You heard what they have been talking about."

"Of course."

"Well, add up the sum and see what it comes to."

"Oh, speak out and say what you have got to say, and no fooling about it."

"Well, I have been hit with an idee, and as it isn't often anything of that kind comes my way I have held fast to it."

"What is it?"

"This fellow Jake seems to have a hold on Robert in a money matter of some kind."

"So it would appear."

"And that Jake is more of a plotter than Robert, is plain to be seen."

"It looks so."

"Well, you heard what he proposed, and what Robert said to it. I have an idea Jake may try the same thing himself, and so throw Robert and the parson both overboard. What do you think of that?"

"Great ginger! I hadn't thought of it, Billy."

"No discredit to ye, Skinny, for it was only a chance idea with me, and it may not amount to anything. But, I'm going to have an eye on Mr. Jake."

They paused, but there was nothing worth listening to being said by the others, and Billy said:

"Skinny, I am going home right off and rig up. I want you to stay here and keep your eyes and ears open. Will you do that?"

"What good will it do ye to rig up?" Skinny asked.

"Because I'm too well dressed to be hanging around over there where the girl is imprisoned."

"Well, all right; but what am I to do if they go away? And if they part company, which one am I to follow?"

Like Mr. Robert, Fatty-Skinny was a better soldier than he was a general.

"Why, stay here, if they stay, but if they go away keep your eye on Jake and follow him. Don't let him get away from you till you find out more about him and where he hangs out."

"I savvy."

"All right, and I guess you're big enough to carry it out."

Billy took his leave.

"I ought to have known enough to tone down a little," he muttered, as he bent his steps in the direction of home. "But, then I had an idea that mebbe I'd have to go to that hotel again, and they don't admit tramps there."

He had gone only a few steps from the beer garden when he came to a sudden stop.

"Sweet pertaters!" he exclaimed, "here is another gol! Now I am in a fix, for sure. There are going to be more horns to this dilemma than I and my slender—Ha, ha! That shows what the force of habit will do. My fat and solid partner, I mean. More horns to the beast than we can take care of without danger of missing some and getting hooked by others. Now, what is going on here, I wonder?"

He had reason to stop short and consider.

Just ahead of him was the villainous-looking rascal he had seen on the train that morning, and whose name he had now learned was Burke Wedger.

He was talking with another fellow as evil-looking as himself, and they seemed to be deeply engrossed in whatever they were talking about.

There was an excellent opportunity, too, as Billy immediately discovered, for him to get near enough to hear what was passing between them. They were standing near the steps leading to an Elevated Station above, and all he would have to do would be to get quickly around on the other side.

That he lost no time in doing.

"But will there be money in it?" Burke Wedger's companion was asking.

"Of course there'll be money in it!" was the assurance. "If there wasn't, it ain't likely I'd be in it, is it?"

"Well, no; but then, you will get it all and I'll have ter whistle fer what I git out of it. That is about the way I figger it out, anyhow."

"Now you look here, Gil Brand; you orter know Burke Wedger better'n that. I say there is money in it for you and me both, and that orter settle it. When I say a thing to a pal I mean it."

"But a feller is likely ter git inter trouble, ain't he?"

"Haven't you been likely to get into trouble any time during the last twenty years or more? And haven't you got off scot free so far?"

"But they say it's a long lane that don't have no turn in it."

"Well, if you are afraid, say so, and I'll look for somebody else to help me. I thought you had more backbone than this."

"Hold on, now; don't go off in too big a hurry. Give a feller a chance ter think a minute, can't ye?"

"What's the use, if you are afraid of it?"

"Don't be too sartain about my bein' afraid of it. How much money is there in it for me?"

"Well, a hundred dollars, anyhow."

"That means, a hundred dollars whether you succeed in your little game or not, I s'pose."

"Nixey. That means if I do succeed. If I don't, then you don't get anything. I can't afford to pay unless I make something to pay with."

"Must be makin' somethin' anyhow, ain't ye?"

"Well, if I am, that is another affair. This will be a new dodge to make more than my regular fee, don't ye see? And if you help me, then you come in for some too."

"Well, I'll take hold of it with ye. What is it ye want of me?"

"Could you take the gal to your house, after we let her 'scape?"

"Sure."

"And you and your woman would see to it that she didn't 'scape fer good and git all ther puddin' in ther muck."

"Yer could trust us fer that."

"Then consider it a bargain. You come around jest about dark and we'll talk it over further."

"I'll be there, sure."

A word or two more and they parted, one going one way and the other the opposite.

Billy did not have to stand to decide which of the fine fellows he should follow. He knew where Burke Wedger was lodged, but he knew nothing about this other man, Gil Brand.

Accordingly it was to Mr. Brand he gave his attention.

"Sweet pertaters!" he muttered, as he moved off after him, "how many more mixes is this thing going to have to it before I can get a grip on it? If they stir it up much more I won't know which is head or tail to it, and I'll go off and commit hara-kiri with a bootjack, or do somethin' else about as desperate. Never seen a case double up so fast in my life. Seems to me it's a reg'lar cut-throat game all around, and the best villain will be the one to win—providing I don't get in my little act somewhere. Let's see, I'll have to think a little on this matter, or it is going to get so big pretty soon that I won't be able to hold it at all."

He snatched off his hat and scratched his head as he went along.

"In the first place," he mused, "there was the bit of a suspicion that hit me in the cheese-box on the train this morning. That was only a mole-hill then, but it has grown until it's a mountain with half a dozen peaks, more or less, and I guess it's more than less by several. First, there is that slick-looking preacher, so-called. He is the king-bee of the lot, and the greatest rascal of them all. No preacher about him, not a bit. He's more like a thoroughbred gambler than anything else. He has a hold on the young lady, somehow, and means to make her marry Robert if he can. Robert is willin' enough, but not so the girl. Then here is Jake, he comes in with advice for Robert, and has some sort of a hold on him. I have got to keep an eye on Jacob, or somethin' may get away from me yet. Then, to make it worse yet, here is Burke trying to get up a bargain with this Gil Brand to run the girl through another course of money-makin' jugglery. Sweet pertaters! I'd like ter be inspector, with the hull police force at my command fer about one hour, now!"

But, he wasn't, and he realized it.

"Poor girl," he said to himself, thoughtfully, "they are makin' it interestin' for her, whoever she is. Wish I could get a chance to talk to her about two minutes. Here they are pitching her about from pillar to post, and draggin' her through rat-holes without number, so ter say,

each one smaller than t'other, and there won't be anything left of her if they keep that business up long. Willyum, you have got to get in your little graft here somewhere, and the sooner you go about it the better. It won't do for you to take hold of any more sub-divisions, if there are any; you have got about as many irons in the fire as you can attend to. The next thing you know you will have to call out your reserve force, which same is Roger, and then you will have to get out the police to keep him out of trouble. You have got to buckle right down to it, Willyum, and come out on top of the heap, or it won't do for you to go around to see the inspector. Hello! this seems to be the end of the trail."

He had followed his man to a miserable house on a miserable street on the east side of the Bowery, where he entered and shut the door after him with a bang.

There was no fastening to the door, or did not appear to be any in use if so, and Billy might have gone in if he desired, but he had no desire in that direction. He waited outside.

As some minutes passed, and the man did not reappear, he set about finding out whether it was his residence or not.

This was easy enough to accomplish. Having the man's name, he inquired of some children if they knew where such a person lived, and they promptly directed him to the house into which he had seen him enter.

That was all Billy wanted with Mr. Brand for the present.

If the young woman fell into his hands, Billy would know where to look for her, and that was a winning point in the game.

Without further loss of time he hastened home, where he found the old ranger regaling the two women and several other persons with tales of the wild and woolly West, dwelling particularly upon the exploits of Billy.

Billy only stopped long enough to give an outline of his plans, and then went for his trunk and got out his Chinese disguise.

When he stepped out of the adjoining room in full Celestial array, there were several screams from the women, and he had to talk pretty straight English for a few moments to reassure them.

Finally, when he made his appearance upon the street again, hardly any one would have taken him for anything but a genuine Chinaman, without a closer look than he was likely to receive from passers in the street.

CHAPTER VIII.

ONLY A DOOR BETWEEN THEM.

WITHOUT loss of time Billy made his way to the garden, where he had left Skinny to watch the man Robert and his friend Jake—particularly the latter.

No one objected to his going in, but he had no sooner entered than there was a general objection to his remaining there for any extended period. It was clear that he was barred.

"What d'ye want here?" a rough fellow demanded, stepping up to him.

Billy thought at once he had made a mistake in adopting this disguise, after all.

"Me wantee find a man," he said, in as good Chinese lingo as he could command. "Mebbe you seen him allee samee?"

"How the deuce do I know anything about him?" was the retort. "Take a look around, and if you don't see him quick, then git."

Billy took a survey of the room, and not seeing anything of his partner there, took the man's hint and "got" according to direction, not caring to get into trouble.

"That settles it," he said to himself. "Skinny has had to take to the trail alone, and I hope he will make a big showing for his part in the game. He will certainly make a big subject, if they fix him cut for the hospital. But, he knows a thing or two, does Skinny."

The next move for him to make was to go over and take a survey of the place where he knew the girl to be imprisoned.

By this time it was the middle of the afternoon, and he did not hope for much further than a general survey of the place from the outside. He did not think any opportunity would offer for him to get in before night.

But, in this one respect he made a mistake, for his disguise as a Chinaman was going to serve his purpose here better than he had thought.

When he reached the place of his destination he found it was in a Chinese neighborhood, and that some of the Celestials occupied the very house to which he was giving his attention.

"Sweet pertaters!" he exclaimed, on seeing this, "here is good luck or bad, one or the other, and hang me if I know which it is going to be. If I could only talk Chinese now I would be all hunk. But, I can't. I can talk considerable of U. S., however, and I'll have to make that answer the purpose."

He was about crossing the street to the house, when something caused him to stop.

That something was the sudden appearance around the corner of the man Jake.

"Hello!" Billy said to himself, "I'll bet my hat against your boots, Willyum, that Skinny ain't far behind."

He waited, and sure enough Skinny soon put in an appearance.

Watching him for a moment, Billy wanted to see what kind of detective shadowing he was capable of doing.

Skinny appeared to be looking neither to the right nor the left, nor in any other direction in particular. He strolled ahead as though aimlessly.

The man Jake had stopped opposite the house, and only a few steps from where Billy was standing, and was taking a leisurely survey of the premises as though he had some idea of buying the house.

Skinny crossed the street, and disappeared behind the next corner, and Billy wondered whether he hadn't lost the trail. In a few seconds he was reassured. There was a saloon on that corner, the corner furthest from Billy, and in a moment Billy saw his ally looking out the window of that delectable "shebang."

"He is a jewel, and no discount," Billy said to himself. "He had his eye on his man all the time, and seeing him stop here, dodged into that place to watch him out of the window. That wasn't slow, Skinny, and I'm going to promote you. I'll make you a captain, just as sure as your name is Jim. Wonder if he recognizes me? Anyhow, I won't give him the tip, for it might make him careless."

Billy stopped short in his reflections, for the man Jake had stepped up to him.

"You live 'round here, John?" he asked.

"Me live ovel on Mott stleet," was Billy's answer.

"Oh! ye do, hey? Darn me if you ain't the best-lookin' Chinese I ever seen in New York. What's yer name?"

"Name Sam Kee," was the prompt response.

"Got any friends around here?"

"None light here," answered Billy. "Friends on Mott stleet. Me not long 'go comee ffrom San F'risco."

"Oh! that's it, is it? Then you don't know who lives in that house over there where the Chinese sign is, of course."

"No, me don't know; me just out lookee 'lound little."

"Oh, all right. I only wanted to know, that's all. Much 'bliged to ye, John; you are a purty decent sort of Chinese."

With that Mr. Jake turned and walked away a few paces, took another survey of the house, and passed on up the street.

Billy looked to see if Skinny was going to follow him further, and presently saw his fat lieutenant put in an appearance and saunter off in the same direction.

"He's good for him," thought Billy. "I'll bet he will track him to his lodging place, or wherever he roosts, and find out all about him that is to be learned. I am proud of you, Skinny, and some day I'll tell you so."

The coast all clear now, Billy had to act.

So far he had learned no more than had the man Jake. And what he had gained very evidently could not have been much.

Taking only a look at the outside of the house was not going to reveal what might be within, any more than studying the outside of a prize-package would give knowledge of its contents.

Of course both Billy and the man had the general information that here the girl was imprisoned, guarded by the man and woman—Burke Wedger and his wife, Mary Ann. And in respect to this Billy had the advantage of Jake. He knew Burke was not now within.

Without long puzzling his head concerning what good Jake's visit to the place could have done him, Billy crossed the street and boldly entered the hall door of the barracks.

The smell of all that was evil greeted him immediately, but he meant to face the music and so did not let that deter him from going further.

The hall was somewhat dark, but Billy made out the stairs, and proceeded up them as though he was quite at home there.

He heard talking above, and knew some Chinamen had their home somewhere in that direction. This was to his liking, for his

presence in the hall would not be so likely to arouse suspicion.

At the first landing he stopped to listen.

Some talking in the nearest room proclaimed Italian tenants there, proof, he concluded, that that was not the place he wanted to find.

Going further he fared better. When he reached the next landing he heard a woman talking in tones more forcible than polite, and in a louder tone than caution would have suggested.

"You want to shut right up this sniveling, now," she was saying, "or it will be the worse for you. I'll give ye somethin' to remember, if ye don't."

"Oh! please have mercy on me and let me get away!" pleaded a different voice. "I will do anything in the world for you, afterward, when I am able. I will give you a good deal more money than you will ever get out of my guardian."

"Oh, now, you have said that before, and you haven't a dollar to your name. All you have got is the duds on your back, and they ain't any too many. Besides, we are not waiting for dollars to grow."

A sob was plainly heard.

"Shut up, I say!" the woman growled. "If you do that again, I'll give you something to cry about. If you try to make a noise to draw attention, I'll lick ye within an inch of your life, and if you holler for help, I'll spoil your beauty if I have to poke one of your eyes out!"

The fierceress with which this was said told Billy she meant it, and he knew the prisoner was cowed to silence.

"You have got to do as your guardian wants you to this time, young miss, and no more fool-in' about it," the woman went on. "You are makin' a fool of yourself, if you only knowed it. He has done his duty by you all these years, and now for you to defy him at last is the worst thing you could do. I don't blame him, not a bit I don't."

"But, Mrs. Wedger, you know how I hate Robert Howmark, and I never can give willing consent to marry him."

"You are a fool!" cried the woman. "He is a fine young gentleman in every way, and it is only because you have got your head full of fool ideas about Bronson Pender that you are so stubborn. He is worth a dozen of that poor upstart, and if you have not the sense to know it, your guardian is going to see to it for you. Now I don't want another word with you, and it won't be well for you if I have to come in here again. I warn you of that."

After that there was the slamming of a door, and Billy heard a sigh from the fair prisoner.

"Here's another notch in my stick," Billy thought. "There is another lover in the case, it seems, whose name is Bronson Pender. I must remember names. Then, too, the so-called parson is the young lady's guardian. I have got that much down fine as a crowbar, anyhow. Well, here I am; what am I going to do?"

He reflected. What he desired was, to see the young lady and talk with her.

If he could do that, by any means, and inspire her with some hope, then it might be more easy for her to hold out against her foes.

He was at the front of the hall, on the third floor of the house, and the room in which the young woman was seemed to be a small hall bedroom, opening into the larger room adjoining.

These facts he had gathered from hearing the woman go out and close a door after her.

There was, as the reader will understand, a door from the hall into the room where the prisoner was, but that, as Billy knew well enough without trying it, was secured.

He thought it all over well, and decided that if he expected to be of any help to the girl he must not let the woman find out he was there. Hence, it was useless for him to try and see her. But, could he not talk with her through the door?

This he decided to try, at all risks.

His first proceeding was to tap gently with his finger-nails a sort of tattoo on one of the panels.

He listened, and the low sobbing he had heard had now ceased.

Again he tapped, and after that, putting his lips to the keyhole he whispered, as loudly as he dared:

"Do you hear me, young lady?"

Billy heard her move and come to the door.

"Be careful not to make a noise," he cautioned. "Do—you—hear—me?"

"Yes, sir, I hear you," came the whispered answer, in excited breaths. "Who are you?"

"I am a friend," Billy made known. "I am

here to help you, but I cannot do anything yet, further than talk with you a minute. Who are you, and why are you here as a prisoner? Don't be afraid to tell me."

CHAPTER IX.

A FINAL HOME CONSULTATION.

"THANK God! My prayers are answered!"

So Billy heard the girl exclaim in yet lower tone, to herself.

"You must tell me who you are," she said a little louder. "It seems to me I have no friend in all the world, and I must know you before I tell you much."

"And I can't tell you who I am, any further than that I am a friend," Billy made response. "I am here to help you if I can."

"How did you know I was here, and that I am a prisoner?"

"I have just heard enough to tell me a good deal. I have made up my mind to help you out of here if I can."

"Well, I must trust you."

"I assure you I mean just what I say."

"What do you want to know?"

"Will you answer some questions?"

"Yes, willingly. I am hopeless, and I believe you have been sent to help me. What can I tell you?"

"What is your name?"

"Laura Wardley."

"Where are you from?"

"Philadelphia."

"Is the Reverend B. Greene Graceaway your guardian?"

"I never heard of such a person, sir."

"That so? Then there must be some mistake. What is your guardian's real name?"

"His name is Tomkins Green."

"Does he look something like a preacher?"

"Yes, if you don't know what he is, perhaps he does."

"He is the man who brought you from Philadelphia this morning?"

"Yes; he and his wife, and their two miserable hirelings."

"Why did they bring you from there to New York?"

"Because they are afraid of the only friend I have in the world, and want to force me to marry a man of their selecting."

"Who is your friend, this Bronson Pender, whose name I heard mentioned?"

"Yes."

"Is there money at stake somewhere? Are you worth a fortune in your own name, or something of that sort?"

"Yes, I have always understood that I should have a considerable fortune when I marry or come to legal age."

"That is about what I thought was in the wind. But, you keep a stiff upper lip, Miss Wardley, and if we don't fix them out, it won't be my fault."

"How are you going to help me?"

"I'm going to make out a case against them, and then I'll bring the police, if necessary, and get you out of their hands that way and make them sick of their undertaking."

"Oh! if you can only do that!"

"I can, and will. Now, pay attention to what I am going to tell you. Are you listening?"

"Yes, yes," eagerly.

"Well, it is this: Perhaps you will get a chance to escape to-night. Perhaps they will leave a door unfastened, or something of that kind, and if they do that you must—"

Billy heard a heavy step on the stairs, and had to stop.

There was considerable noise in the old barracks all the time, and this step had not caught his attention until quite near.

He had been on the point of telling the girl what he had heard between Burke Wedger and Gil Brand, and so put her on her guard, but he had to spring back in order not to be detected there.

The person who was coming was so close that Billy had to beat a hasty retreat up the next flight of stairs, but he did not go all the way. The hall was not very light, and he stopped and looked down over the railing.

A man was striding along toward the front door, and Billy recognized the man whose name he had learned to be Burke Wedger.

Stopping at the door near the front, he opened it and went in.

With two or three hasty strides Billy was at that door, his felt shoes having permitted him to move almost silently.

"Well, what of it, Burke?" he heard the woman greet.

"I guess it's going to work," was the response.

"Then you have seen Gil? What's he say?"

"He 'grees to it. He is comin' here after dark to talk it over."

"I have been thinkin' maybe it won't be for the best, after all, Burke."

"Oh! what's the matter now? Some more woman's fool notions about it? What is the reason it won't be for the best?"

"Well, you know what confidence Green is puttin' in us, and it will be a thin story when we tell him the girl has got away from us. He'll know we lie to him."

"Oh! it's that's all that troubles ye, is it? Well, I have been thinkin' some about it, too, and I've come to the 'clusion not ter lie to him at all. I'll tell him more money or no girl."

"Dare you do it?"

"Dare I do it? Did you ever know anything that Burke Wedger didn't dare to do?"

"But, he may turn us off altogether after he gets the girl back again."

"No fear of that. We have got too much knowledge about him and his affairs fer that. Sides, we won't let him get her back till we make him come down another five hundred; see?"

"Well, it is your business, but I thought we were making out well enough as it was."

"Mary Ann, we ain't into this thing fer fun, but to make money, and the more we can make the better for us. See? When they come here to-night there won't be no girl here, and they won't see her, either, unless they come down with just five hundred dollars more."

"Well, I suppose you know best, so let it be as you say. But, hadn't we better be careful how we talk? She can hear every word we say."

The man took the hint, and lowered his voice so that Billy failed to catch anything more for some moments.

Billy remained there at the door, still listening, and at the same time was running matters over in mind in order to make something like order of the different threads.

Presently the door opened suddenly, and the man stepped out.

Billy had had no warning of this, and he was caught as neatly as could have been possible had a trap been laid for him.

He was upon his feet in a second, before the astonished Burke could lay hands on him, and sprung back out of reach, muttering something in make believe Chinese.

"What in blazes are you doing here, you heathen?" Burke cried, fiercely.

"Allee same me dlop some money, tly to findde him," was the answer, in rather shaky tones.

Billy thought a little pretense of fear would help the story.

"Lost some money, did ye? Are ye sure ye ain't lyin' to me? Wasn't ye listenin' there at the door? Say!"

"No, me no lie; me— Hi! here is, allee same!"

With that Billy stooped suddenly, and held a quarter up to view.

The ruse was successful; the man was made to believe it, and so the ex-gamin escaped getting into trouble with him.

"Well, get along away from here, then!" Burke ordered. "If I find you here by this door again I'll kick holes in ye."

"Me allee light now," cried Billy, cheerfully. "Me go 'long. Good-by!"

And along he went, down the stairs, and out of the house.

Burke followed him down, having started on an errand when he opened the door, and when Billy left the house he looked after him closely. Billy, however, never once turned his head to look back, but kept on his way, turned the corner, and was out of sight in no time.

"Sweet pertaters!" he muttered, "but that was a close rub to getting into a peck o' trouble, sure pop. It makes me think I'm a boy again, almost. Never took up a case yet that didn't get me into some sort of a diffikilty before I got done with it. Now I must get off this rig and put on another."

He went home, and there found fat Skinny.

"Hello!" Billy cried, you here, Skin?"

"It looks like me, don't it?"

"Yes, that's so. A fellow can see you now, right plain. Time was when there was no finding you, even with a glass."

"Oh! dry up!"

"Well, where did you leave your man?" Billy inquired.

"Why, I had followed him to the house where the girl is, where he took a look at the place, had a few words with you, and went on."

"How did you know it was me?"

"I thought so then, and when I got here I asked your mom what rig you had on. Now your own appearance proves it right up."

"Didn't know whether you spotted me or not. You did good work on that trail. But, where did you leave him?"

"Why, over at No. — — street."

"Sweet pertaters!"

"What's the matter now?"

"Matter enough. That is where Gil Brand lives!"

"And who the mischief is Gil Brand?"

"That's so; you haven't been posted on that lay, have you?"

The old ranger and the mothers were giving all attention, and often putting in a word, but no need to quote them.

"Course I haven't," responded Skinny.

"What has he got to do with the matter, anyhow? Is he in it with the rest of them?"

"Well, rather."

"How?"

Billy told what his experience had been after taking his leave of the lean—now fat—lieutenant, thus posting Skinny on the latest to date.

"This is getting to be a complicated mix of mess," Billy presently remarked. "That young lady has got to be got out of the hands of the foe, or something is going to happen yet so we'll lose track of her."

"I wouldn't be 'ary bit s'prised," observed the ranger.

"I'll tell you what, Billy," spoke up Mrs. Weston.

"Well, let's hear from you, mom," Billy invited.

"Why don't you rescue the poor dear and bring her here?"

"Bully fer you!" cried Billy. "That is just what we will do with her, if we can get her. But, I must slick up and take a trip up to Headquarters."

"Headquarters!" cried Skinny.

"That's what I said," Billy assured. "I haven't been to pay my respects to the inspector yet, and I'm going now. I want a badge, and a right to call on some of his boys when I need them."

CHAPTER X.

BILLY'S HEART BEATS HIGH.

THERE was some further talk all around, after which Billy retired to lay off his Chinese disguise, and adopt his own proper attire once more.

When he came forth he was himself again.

He had put in his pockets such papers as occasion might require him to exhibit to the inspector, as well as his San Francisco badge, and was ready to set out.

"What am I to do?" asked Skinny.

"I don't know, now, unless you take a rest while I am gone," Billy answered.

"He can be company for me," Roger suggested.

"Sorry to leave you here all the time, Roger," said Billy, then, "but, there don't seem to be any part for you to play this act. But, you need rest, anyhow, and the women need some one to talk to them or they would have the blues, for sure."

"You see that you don't forget the week you have promised me, when you get done with this case," urged Mrs. Weston.

"All right, mom! I'll shut my eyes when I get done, and walk straight home, and I'll stay in the house all the whole week; then I'll be sure I won't see anything to give me the fever."

With a light laugh he was gone.

A short time later found him at Headquarters. Here he was not altogether a stranger, and he went right in, and into the inner office, without asking permission of any one.

Some officers around looked at him, but considered from his independent air he must know where he was going and whom he wanted to see, so offered no hindrance.

As he entered he found the inspector in conversation with a young man of about twenty-five, a good-looking, dark haired fellow, who seemed considerably anxious about something. The inspector looked up, and in a moment was on his feet, exclaiming:

"Broadway Billy!"

"I plead guilty," responded Billy, with a smile.

The inspector took his hand and shook it warmly, giving him a hearty welcome home.

The young man looked on with something of interest during the few moments so occupied, but the inspector soon asked Billy to sit down and wait, and turned again to business.

"As you were saying?" he started his visitor.

"Well, that is all I can tell you. I have no clew to offer, but there is no mistake about what I have told you. Tomkins Green is here in this city, and the young lady is in his power—"

"Sweet pertaters!"

So exclaimed Billy, and he was on his feet in an instant.

"Hello!" exclaimed the inspector, "this young gentleman knows something about the case, I'll bet!"

"I'll bet he does, too," cried Billy. "Say," to the young man, "isn't your name Bronson Pender?"

"It is, sir."

"I knew it! And you are from Philadelphia?"

"Yes, yes."

"Good! Inspector, I have got the bulge on this case, and it was partly that that brought me here."

"Is it possible? Let's hear how much you know about it."

"Why, I know this Tomkins Green and his wife came here this morning from Philadelphia, bringing with them a young lady named Laura Wardley. She was a prisoner in their power, and was guarded by a man and woman named Burke Wedger and Mary Ann, his wife."

"Heavens!" cried Pender, "you are right. What more do you know? Can you tell me where Miss Wardley is now?"

"Yes, I know where she is, and was talking with her not so very long ago."

"Then she is alive and well?"

"Yes."

"Thank God. You must take me to her at once."

"Go a little slow!" Billy advised. "We can't do it all at once. Let's talk the thing over a little first."

"But, I must get her out of their power as soon as possible. I would not have her remain in their hands another hour, now that I know where she is."

"Which you do not know, yet," the inspector reminded. "Give this young man his own time, Mr. Pender, and everything will come out all right. He is a young detective in whom I have the greatest confidence."

Broadway Billy's heart gave a great bound, in spite of himself.

At last, the great goal of his ambition had been reached, and from the inspector's own lips had come the thrilling words.

It had always been the dream of his youthful career one day to gain the confidence of this man, and now that day had come! If he felt proud and highly elated we may excuse it.

"The fact of the business is," he said, "the thing isn't quite ripe, and the game mustn't be blocked just yet. Our man Green is playing a fine game, and when I pull the string I want him to be one of the rascals to dance. It will be all ready to-night, however."

"You may tell us all about it, if you like," the inspector here suggested.

Billy thereupon gave him the history of the case from beginning to end, and his story was listened to with close attention.

"You have been doing good work," the inspector complimented. "To be sure you have been lucky in several points, but luck is as much a matter of brains as anything else."

"Yes, there was luck about it, or I wouldn't have got any of the facts," Billy declared.

"That is all right, sir. How about that medal you got in San Francisco?"

Billy blushed to the roots of his hair.

"How did you know anything about that?" he asked.

The inspector smiled.

"I have a way of knowing a good many things, Billy," he answered. "Let me see it, will you?"

"You seem to think pretty sure I've got it with me."

"I know you have, together with other things you would like me to see."

Billy felt that he was no match for this man. His very thoughts seemed to be read at will by the keen-eyed inspector.

Without any more ado Billy showed his badge and some papers in which he had some pride, and justly, too, and the inspector looked at them with real interest.

"Billy," he said, when he had done, "you are a credit to New York. I have had my eye upon you for a long time, and I know what the aim of your ambition has been. I am going to give you a chance."

"I might make a good hand to sweep out office, and the like," Billy suggested, in his dry way.

"Nonsense. I am going to put this case of Mr. Pender's into your hands, where it now is, and let you work it out in your own way. When you have wound it up I want you to come and see me."

"But," said Billy, "I came here to ask help, sir. I don't—"

"Here is all the help you need, and I guess this is what you would like to ask for, anyhow. Take it, and call on any of my men at any time. If San Francisco can honor you with a badge I guess New York can do the same."

To say that Broadway Billy was proud and happy would but tamely express in words his actual feelings.

"Thank you, sir," he said. "I'll do as you say, and I'll try and take care not to disgrace the badge."

"I know you well enough for that. Now, Mr. Pender, you confide everything to Mr. Weston here, and trust him, and everything will come out all right. I had no hope of being able to help you much, when you told me your story, for once let such rascals get lost in New York and it takes time to find them. You see what Weston has done already, and I guess you can have confidence in him."

With that the inspector dismissed them, turning at once to his papers, and there was nothing for them to do but withdraw.

Billy led the way out, and together they left the building.

"How soon will you get the young lady out of their hated power?" Pender asked as they walked away.

"I could do it right away, I suppose," Billy answered.

"Then why not do it, and let every other consideration slip?"

"You heard the reasons I gave the inspector."

"Yes; and, to tell you the truth, I couldn't have much confidence in you, only for the name he has got, and the way he seemed to think so well of you."

"Well, if you can have a little confidence, so much the better. You won't be so likely to spoil my fun. But, I want to know more about this business. Will you tell me all about it?"

"What is it you want to know?"

"Well, what is the rascally game this sleek Green is playing?"

"Why, this Robert Howmark is a nephew of his, you see, and he has selected him as a husband for Miss Wardley. He, Green, is her guardian, you see, and means to get her fortune away from her if he can, or some of it, anyhow. He is giving Howmark this chance, on condition that Howmark is to pay him ten thousand dollars when he gets his hands on the money."

"The old rascal!"

"You may well say so. He tried me on that bait at first, after I and the lady were secretly engaged, and before I knew anything about her expectations, and he got his answer in few words. After that he forbade me the house, and sent Laura away. It was some time before I learned where she was, but at last I found out, and tried to help her, but that brute of a Burke Wedger was always around to balk me. I had my eye on them, however, and a secret spy after them, and no sooner had they taken train for New York than I was informed, and I came here in a hurry. But, I was too late, for they had got into the city, and were, as the inspector said, lost."

"Well, the lost is found, now, and if there isn't some rattling among the dry bones, it will be funny. I want you to go with me to-night, Mr. Pender, and you can have the satisfaction of seeing the rascals trapped."

"Nothing would suit me better, and I will tell Green what I think of him, too, although he knows that pretty well already."

"Sweet pertaters!"

"What's that? What did you say?"

"That's only a way I have of going off, when an idee hits me hard, that's all, and one hit me just then pretty solid."

The young man laughed.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Why, we'll play them a good trick, if everything works so we can. How will that suit you?"

"It is according to what the trick is."

Billy explained it as they went along, and Pender fell in with the plan at once. If everything worked favorably, there was going to be a surprise for somebody before many hours passed by. No need to explain what it was here.

CHAPTER XI.

NAILING SOME FACTS.

THE "Rev. B. Greene Graceaway" and his wife, in their rooms at the hotel, received a caller late in the afternoon.

This time the personage was a clergyman in fact, and a very well known one. He greeted Graceaway in a proper brotherly fashion, and sat down to learn the business that was required of him.

He had been sent for and requested to call at the hotel at this hour.

"I will tell you, sir, what it is," said Graceaway. "I am the guardian of a very self-willed young lady, who has set my authority at defiance in more ways than one. Her latest caprice was to run away and come here to New York."

"Indeed?"

"Exactly. You see, sir, she fancies she is in love with a young man who is in no wise her social equal, and whom she positively must not marry. On the other hand my nephew, rich and talented, is eager to marry her, and at last I have partly got the girl's promise to marry him."

"Then you have found her?"

"Yes; and, like the prodigal, she has seen the error of her way, has had a taste of the bitter side of life, and is ready to admit that perhaps we, my wife and I, know a little more than she, and that we are her best friends after all."

"Well, there is some hope, then, I should say."

"Exactly. Now, the final arrangement is, to have her and my nephew meet here in these rooms at ten to-night, and have the ceremony performed. I desire you to be here to officiate. I being her guardian prefer to have another tie the knot for them, you see."

"I see; and though the hour is rather later than I could wish, I will be on hand."

"That is something that cannot be helped. You see, we have had to order some suitable clothes for the young woman, and woman's clothes cannot be made to order in a moment."

"True, true."

"However, your reward will be such as to make up for the inconvenience of the hour."

"I will be here, I promise, Brother Graceaway."

There was some other talk, and the genuine clergyman took his leave, while the sham preacher turned to his wife, rubbing his sleek hands, and they exchanged a meaning smile.

An hour later they had another caller.

This time it was a member of the legal fraternity, or one who claimed to be.

He was, in truth, a "shyster," one who was ready for any sort of work that came to hand, particularly such cases as his more respectable brethren declined.

"Graceaway?" he inquired.

"The same," was the response. "You are Fudgley?"

"At your service, sir. What is the nature of the business I understand you want done?"

"Sit down and let me explain in full."

The shyster sat and the sleek rascal began to unfold his tale.

"I know the kind of man you are, Mr. Fudgley," he began, "and let me tell you right at the start that this little business is going to put two hundred dollars into your pocket, if you serve me well."

"Ah!" the shyster exclaimed, rubbing his hands around and around vigorously, as though to clean them of everything else for the time being. "You may count on me, sir."

"I know it, sir. I know the man I am dealing with."

Fudgley washed his hands some more.

"You flatter me, sir," he declared.

"I don't mean to, though; I mean to hire you for a certain bit of work, paying you well for it. I will give you the price I said; a sum that many a poor devil has to toil a month for."

"Longer than that, sir."

"We are talking of men with any claim to a profession. Professions are supposed to yield more than trades. But, this is not to the point. Give me your close attention, now."

"You have it, sir. Not a point shall escape me."

"Well, to begin with, I am the guardian of a young lady. Nothing strange about that, in itself, but this particular young lady is worth a cool quarter of a million in her own right."

"Ha!"

"That is the point."

"I should think so, if there is any point to it at all."

"Now, I am going to be plain with you, and let you right into the whole thing, so that you can see just what is required of you."

"That is right."

"This young woman has her mind made up to marry a certain young man, who is as poor as a mouse, and who is only after her money. You see?"

"I see."

"On the other hand, I have a nephew who is going mad about her, and yet he is not aware that she is worth a dollar. Do you see?"

"I see."

"Now, for the reason that I will tell you privately, I am more in favor of my nephew for her husband than I am a stranger."

"I think I see that, too."

"Well, think what you please about it, that is the fact. What is the use of allowing this money to go out of the family?"

"Sueer madness to do so."

"I think so. My nephew will come in for the bulk of it, and he will see that I do not want, for putting the golden opportunity in his way."

"I see."

"Now, here is the thing boiled right down. I want you to draw up a legal paper for this lady to sign as soon as she becomes the wife of my nephew, in which she does willingly and freely, and so forth, transfer everything to her husband. Can you do that?"

"To be sure I can."

"That is the idea, then. She is to be married here to-night, in these rooms, and you are to be on hand. As soon as the knot has been tied you will have the paper ready for her name, and I will see that she signs it, willingly. Then it will be properly witnessed, and the deed is done."

"How does she hold this property, sir?"

"It is money, sir; hard cash. It is to be hers when she comes of legal age, which will be three years hence. Or, it is to be hers when she marries, no matter what her age may be."

"Then it is all plain sailing. Now, sir, the names of these persons, and I will be prepared to serve you truly and well."

"The name of my nephew is Robert Howmark. That of my ward is Laura Wardley. But, bear in mind, at the time of her signing this document her name will be Mrs. Robert Howmark. Don't forget that."

"Ha! that is so. I will bear that in mind. But, I will make it all right, sir; I will make it all right, and it will be so binding that nothing on earth can alter its force when once it has been signed."

"That is good; that is the way I want it."

"That is the way you shall have it. And, the two hundred—"

"You shall have it, all in bright new bills like these, as soon as the job is done."

He displayed a wad of fresh bills as he spoke, to whet the shyster's appetite for the reward that had been promised.

There was some further talk over the matter in hand, and the shyster took his leave, washing his hands all the way down to the street, a broad smile on his face.

When he was gone from the room the pretending parson turned to his wife.

"It is working well, Nancy," he observed.

"Yes, if the girl can only be made to do our will."

"And she shall, if we have to half kill her, that I swear."

"Yes, for it won't do to fail now, after all the trouble we have gone to in the matter."

"I don't know any such word as fail, in this business. I have another plan in mind, if she does refuse out and out."

"What is that?"

"The one I have hinted at before. Getting some one else to play her part in the business."

"But, would it stand in law?"

"Every witness would have to swear to what he sees."

"True; but the identity of the person. How would you get around that? I am afraid there is but one way."

"The 'parson' scratched his head."

"That is the sticker," he had to admit.

"Well, all the more reason why she must and shall marry Robert."

"What time are we to go where she is?"

"We must be there not later than nine."

"That will give us scant time."

"Shall we make it an hour earlier, then?"

"Yes, I think you had better do that."

"I guess you are right. I will send word around at once."

No more was said, and a few moments later the "parson" left the room and went out of the house.

Let us take a look for a moment in an adjoining room.

This room was part of a suite, and between the two apartments were large folding-doors, now locked.

This is no unusual thing in the larger hotels. When the full suite is wanted, there it is; but, when smaller apartments are wanted, but equal-

ly well located, then the suite is made into two smaller ones.

In the other room, then, at the time these things were taking place, with his ear pressed into service, was no other personage than Broadway Billy.

With him, too, was Bronson Pender, now with a false beard on, in order to escape recognition in case he should meet his enemy in the hotel. Billy had taken the precaution.

When the rascal left the other room, Billy and Pender sprung up and clasped hands in a hearty shake.

Both were smiling, and were delighted at the success of a plan Billy had happened to think of after their leaving Headquarters.

"What do you think of it now?" Billy asked, in low voice.

"They deserve prison, the whole lot of them," was the answer.

"You are right; that is to say, all but the genuine preacher. He will be useful."

"Yes, that is so. But, we must be moving, or something may turn up to balk our plans. I could never forgive myself if anything happened to Laura."

"Don't worry about your Laura. My partner will have his eye out for her, if she gets away from one place and is taken to another. But we must be up and doing; so, come along."

CHAPTER XII.

SOME UNDERHAND PLOTTING.

FATTY-SKINNY's report concerning the man he had been set to watch had been correct, of course.

Jake Washers—that was the fellow's name—had gone to the home of Gil Brand, which was also his own home, and there Skinny left him.

Like Billy when after Brand, Skinny had made sure it was the fellow's abiding-place, and that was all he cared about for the present. He gave up the trail and returned to the home-base.

When Jake Washers entered he sought Gil Brand at once, and found him at home.

"Hello!" Gil exclaimed, when he saw who it was, "what brings you home at this hour? What is wanted? Come for me?"

"Well, I wanted to see ye," was the answer. "How would you like to go in with me and make a fortune? I think I've got one right where I kin lay my hands on it, and a sure thing."

"Nobody but a fool would refuse ter make his fortune if chance offered," Gil declared, immediately.

"Then you'll do it?"

"Sartin, if it's reasonably safe."

"Well, it is as safe as anything you gen'ly take hold of."

"What is it?"

"Help me get a gal in my power and marry her."

"That is a new thing in your line, that is sure. When do ye mean ter do it?"

"Right away to-night."

"Can't do it; I've got somethin' else on hand."

"What is it?"

"Somethin' in which another gal is concerned."

"How much is there in it?"

"A hundred."

"I'll give ye two hundred, if you'll help me."

"Where would you git two hundred dollars?"

"Well, I haven't got it now, that's so; but it is there, sure pop, and as soon as I git hold of the gal it's mine."

Jake had dropped into the free and easy manner of speech that came most natural to him, though he could use better language, as we have seen.

He was not a bad looking fellow, a little older than Robert Howmark, and he believed he would be able to carry the point he had in mind; that was, he could make the girl marry him.

"It won't do," Gil Brand objected. "Ready money comes before money promised, every time."

"Then I'll have to get somebody else to take hold with me, that's all."

"I guess you'll have to."

"You see, Gil, I thought I could bring the gal here and you and your wife could hold fast to her for me till I had carried my point."

"Can't be done. One case of that kind on hand at a time is enough. We couldn't do anything with two stolen gals in the house at once. Burke Wedger has got first chance—"

"Burke Wedger?"

"That's what I said."

"What gal is it he is interested in?"

Jake had sprung to his feet, now, and appeared greatly excited.

"Why, some gal he is going ter wring some money out of. But, what has come over ye all of a sudden?"

"I'll bet a dollar it's the same one!"

"Ther same gal?"

"Yes."

"Git out! How kin it be ther same one?"

Who is this one you mean? What has Burke got ter do with her?"

"I tell you what it is, Gil, it is the same one, and here's a double chance for you to make a big stake. It is the same one, and I know it."

"How do you know it?"

"Because Burke isn't interested in but one gal just now. He brought her from Philadelphia this morning, and she is going to be forced to marry a fellow to-night, against her will—"

"It is ther same one, Jake, and that's a fact. How did you git onto it? What interest have you in it? Tell me ther bull story."

"I happen to know the fellow they want her to marry. He has told me all about it. He owes me money, and has been telling me of this thing for a month or more. As soon as he gets hold of the girl's money he is going to square up. But, I have got a game worth two of that."

"What is it?"

"Haven't I told you already?"

"Not that I know of."

"Yes, I have. The girl is rich in her own name, and the fellow she marries is going to be fixed for life. I made up my mind to knock Robert out and marry the girl myself."

"Not a bad idee; but, would she have ye?"

"She'd have to, whether she wanted to or not. I'll make her do it, or it will be the worse for her. And if you will cheat Burke and help me, there will be a big thing in it for you."

"You said there was a double chance for me in it."

"And so there is."

"How?"

"Why, if I fail in my plans, then we can make Burke come down handsomely and give the girl back to him."

"It looks good enough, Jake, but you don't want to forget as you go along that Burke Wedger is a mighty bad sort of man ter cross."

"I am not afraid of him."

"Nur me, nuther, but he'd as leev shoot a feller as not."

"We can all play at that game. But, what do ye say? What is his game, anyhow, that he wants you to take the girl?"

"Why, he is goin' ter make the other fellers come up higher fore he lets 'em have her."

"It is a sort of sharp game all around, then, ain't it?"

"Yes; and the sharpest man is going to win it."

"And there's another thing about it, too, Jake."

"What is that?"

"Why, it looks as if we have either got to pull together, or else fight head against each other."

"That is a fact. You have either got to help me, or lose all, and I will be the one who will count the dollars all alone."

"Mebby you will. I kin expose your little skeem to Burke, and so balk you all around. See?"

"And that won't do at all. Gil, if we work together we are going to win, and nothin' can stop us. Come in with me, and I'll go halves with you."

"Even if you marry the girl?"

"Yes."

"I'll do it, by great guns!"

"And if I can't marry her, then we'll bleed Burke, and you can go shares with me in that."

"I don't know about that. That is my own case, and you hadn't orter come in for a share of that."

"Then it means a fight between us on that. We had better have it all understood before we begin."

"That's so."

"Hal here is the idea, and more money in it, too!"

"What is it?"

"Say you'll share and share alike, all around; that is, you and me; and I'll put you onto the best thing yet, that is to say, providing my plan don't work."

"Well, all right, if I must. What is it?"

"You swear you'll keep your word?"

"Yes."

"Well, if the marrying game don't work, then we'll step over Burke's head and deal with the man that is most interested, and make him

come down with a cool thousand. How does that strike you?"

"Hal now you are talking. That is something worth fighting for."

The two rascals shook hands over it, and began to lay plans, trying to leave nothing undone to insure the success of their villainous plot.

Night came on, and when it was about dark Gil Brand went to keep his appointment with Burke Wedger.

He found Burke waiting for him, and immediately they began planning the scheme.

Previous to this, Broadway Billy, in rough attire, had paid another visit to the house, and had had a few words of conversation with the prisoner, as before.

"Well," asked Gil, in low tone, "how are ye going to work it?"

"I have been tryin' to think out a good plan," answered Burke, "but can't seem to get hold of the right thing."

"Well, let's hear how close ye have come to it."

"The only thing I have half-settled on is two things; that is to say, one of 'em, whichever you think is best."

"Out with 'em, then."

"Well, one is, to take the gal right cut by force, and take her to your house and have done with it."

"That's a good one, if it wasn't that she might make a fuss, draw 'tention, and so make a mess of the hull thing for us. What's t'other?"

"Well, that was, to let her have a chance to get away, and when she is on the move have your wife meet her and get her to go home with her—"

"That won't do. Too many chances of her gettin' away."

"That's what I thought, and I think the first is best."

"And that won't do, fer the same reason. Now, let me tell ye a plan I have in my head. I have been thinkin' some about it, too."

"Well, what is your idee?"

"You, and your wife, make a bargain with the gal, offerin' to let her escape if she will promise to pay you five hundred dollars when she gets her boodle. She will bite at that bait quick enough. Then, to impress on her mind that you mean biz, make her sign a paper fore ye will let her go. See?"

"That is the best yet," spoke up Burke's wife.

"I b'lieve it is," agreed Burke.

"Then," continued Brand, "when it has been fixed all right, so as to blind the girl and make her think it's all a real thing, you offer to go out and get a cab for her, telling her the driver will take her to a place where a good woman will care for her till morning, when she can go back to Philadelphia."

"First rate!" Burke cried. "That will do it right brown. Mary Ann, you go right in and tell the girl the story, for you are just the one to do that, and if she agrees to the plan we will carry it out in a hurry. We have got to be quick about it, anyhow, for the parson is coming here an hour earlier than we looked for him."

CHAPTER XIII.

FROM FRYINGPAN TO FIRE.

THE woman went into the room where the fair prisoner was.

Of course the foregoing conversation had been in too low a tone for the girl to overhear.

"Well, how are you, pretty one?" she asked.

"Oh, if you would only take pity on me, Mrs. Wedger!" the girl cried.

"Are you so determined not to marry the man your guardian wants you to marry, poor child?" the woman asked.

Her softened tone surprised the girl.

"Oh! if you could only know!" she cried.

"Won't you please let me go, Mrs. Wedger?"

The woman sat down and paused in a thoughtful way.

"We have been talking this thing over, Burke and me," she said, "and we have made up our minds that it is playing it rough on you. But, you see, if we let you go we lose money."

"No! No, you will not lose money! Only let me go, and when I get my money I will pay you double what that wretch would give you. I promise it—I swear I will do what I say. Won't you let me go?"

"How much would you promise to pay?"

"Anything you demand; anything that I can pay."

"Would you pay five hundred dollars?"

"Yes! Yes!"

"But where will you go if we let you out?"

"I don't know; I would go anywhere rather than fall into his hands again."

"But, you have no money."

"No; but I do not care for that."

"New York is a bad place to be alone in without money. Might almost as well be in a howlin' wilderness."

"Oh, I can find some one who will befriend me. I can go to the police and ask them to take care of me and send for—for some friend at Philadelphia."

"No, that won't do, my dear."

"Then you have only raised my hopes to dash them at once?"

"No; but it won't do for you to go out alone without money or friends. We are short of money ourselves, or we'd help you."

"Then what am I to do?"

"You wait till I go talk to Burke a minute."

The woman returned to the other room.

"Well, what does she say?" Burke demanded, in the same low, guarded tone.

"She is willin'. She will give anything she's got to get away."

The woman told what had passed between her and the girl, and the two men gave close attention to her words.

"That is all we want," said Gil Brand. "I will go out and get the rig, and you do the rest. I'll be back here in no time."

"All right; and don't make no bungle of it, fer we depend on you, now, you see, and your pay depends on our success."

"I'm fly, you bet."

With that Gil was off, and Burke and his wife turned their attention to their part of the hateful scheme.

The woman went into the other room, released the girl, and brought her out to face her master, as the woman had to acknowledge the brute to be.

"Well, my gal, you want ter git away, do ye?" Burke said.

"Oh! if you will only give me the chance!"

"Well, that is what we think of doin', if you do what we want ye to do."

"I'll do anything you say."

"Ye see, we have made up our minds that we ain't gettin' enough out of this thing fer the work we are doin' and the risk we are takin', and so we're goin' ter give you a chance."

"Only tell me what I must do."

"Well, you must sign a paper, sayin' that you will pay us five hundred dollars as soon as you get your money, and sayin' also that you won't never bring this thing up against us."

"I will do that willingly, oh! so willingly!"

"That is all right; but, when you get out you won't know where to go, and ye may get into wuss trouble than you are in here. How about that?"

"I will take the risk of that."

"You don't know what New York is, my gal. Now, he's a little game Mary Ann and me have been thinkin' out."

"What is it?"

"Well, ye see it is all to our interest that ye don't come to no harm, fer if ye do we will be out all around."

"Yes, that is so."

"Now, Mary Ann has a friend, a ruther good woman, who will take keer of ye a day or so, and we want ye to go there. I have sent out fer a kerridge to take ye there and you must go."

"You are not trying to deceive me?"

"Does it look like it? Here we are cheatin' your guardian, and givin' up all we expected to get out of him. I guess it shows fer itself, don't it?"

"Yes, yes! When will the carriage be here?"

"Mighty soon. I'll fix the paper while Mary Ann gits you ready."

"All right, but be quick about it. Oh! how can I ever repay you for this act of kindness?"

"Oh, it ain't so much kindness as it is business, so don't think we are angels yet."

Burke busied himself with some writing at once, while the woman put a shawl around the girl, adjusted her hat on, and made her ready.

"There!" exclaimed Burke, when he had finished, "this covers the ground, I reckon. It says you are to pay us five hundred when you git your boodle, and that you ain't to say nothin' about this little racket."

"Give me the pen," the girl hurried.

It was put into her hand, and she signed her name to the paper.

"Now," she cried, "let me go. I have done my part, don't for Heaven's sake refuse to do yours."

"No fear of that, me gal. The rig will be here in short order, and then you will soon be out of reach of your hated guardian."

Just then came a loud knock at the door.

Burke opened it, and it was Gil Brand, who stepped in.

"The cab is ready and waitin', sir," said he, "cordin' to your orders."

"All right. You are to take this young lady to the house of Mr. Gil Brand, and tell his wife to take the best of care of her as long as she wants to stay. You know where the place is."

"Yes, I know."

"All right. Don't let anything happen to the lady, and see that she gets safe in Mrs. Brand's house before you leave her."

"All right. Come right along with me, lady."

"Yes, you go with him, my dear," urged the woman. "He will take you to the woman we told you about."

"And, mind one thing," added Burke. "Don't forget this paper I hold, and don't you try to go back on it, when you get among your friends again. If you do, it won't be well fer ye, that's all."

"Oh! I will keep my word, surely I will."

The girl hurried out after Gil Brand, who led the way down to the street.

As soon as they were out the door he took her by the hand and led her to a cab that was in waiting, and hurried her into it.

Closing the door with a snap, he sprang up beside the driver and away the vehicle went, at a lively pace, the girl not knowing where she was being taken.

Nor was that the worst. No sooner had she been thrust into the cab than she found herself in the presence of an unknown man, one whom she had never seen before, and fear seized her at once.

"Who are you, sir?" she demanded.

"My name is Jacob Washers," was the prompt answer.

"And what are you doing here? I was to have this cab alone, I thought."

"I am merely going along to see that you reach your destination all right," the man answered.

"By whose orders?"

"Now, never you mind that. You are going to be taken care of all right, and that is all you need worry about."

Laura's fears began to increase, but she tried to think perhaps it was all right.

Perhaps it was only a precaution Burke Wedger had taken, so that he would not lose her, since her safety was his only security for the money she had promised to pay him.

The cab rolled on, and nothing more was said between them.

The man kept his seat, did not offer in any way to molest her, and so she was coming to think it was as she had thought it out.

Presently the cab stopped, and Mr. Washers opened the door and sprang out, offering his hand to her, and there was nothing for her to do but accept his offered help.

Brand was down from the top at the same time, and as soon as her feet touched the ground she was hurried across the sidewalk and into a house before she had time to think or act.

The door closed after her, and she was hurried on up the stairs, now screaming with fright, and into a room at the rear.

"Here you are, my lady," cried the man Washers.

"What do you mean, ruffians?" the girl cried, springing away from them, and drawing her figure to its full height, in a naturally tragic way, her eyes flashing.

"Keep cool a minute and we'll tell you what it means," was the response.

"I demand my release at once, sir!"

"You won't get it."

"Burke Wedger lied to me, then, did he?"

"We have got the bulge on him, my lady! This is our game, now."

"And what are you going to do with me?"

"Well, if you are ready to hear it, I suppose I may as well tell you now as any time."

"I demand to know at once."

"Well, I know all about your trouble with your guardian, and about his wanting you to marry Bob Howmark."

"Well?"

"We are going to help you out of that fix."

"And how?"

"We will give you your choice of two chances."

"Name them!"

"The first is, to marry me. I am—"

"You insult me!"

"Perhaps; but that is the situation."

"I will take my own life first! You will drive me to do that. I demand you to set me free, and that at once! Do you hear? At once!"

CHAPTER XIV.

"THERE IS MANY A SLIP."

GIL BRAND stood with his back against the door, while Jake Washers was nearer to the girl.

Both laughed at her, in a manner that was not calculated to soften her anger any. She saw how helplessly in their power she was.

"You need not get so high about it," Washers said. "We are not going to let you get away from us, you can bet on that. You will either marry me or we will sell you back to your guardian."

"I will never marry you, you villain! nor will you ever put me in the power of my guardian. I tell you I will kill myself before I will submit to either. I am desperate, now, and mean just what I say. If I do that, my blood will be on your heads, and I will haunt you while you live."

"That sounds all right, but such talk as that belongs to blood-and-thunder drama, my dear. This is real life, as you will find before you are done with it. Now, let us consider the matter. I offer myself as your husband. I am as good as Rob Howmark, and maybe a little better. I won't brag of that. Anyhow, you might go further and fare worse."

The helpless girl had turned her back to him.

"Then, if you don't cotton to me, after a fair trial, you could settle a good portion of your property on me and we'd part company. See? All I am after anyhow is your money; I don't care particularly about you."

The girl turned instantly to face him.

"If that is so," she cried, "you are welcome to the money. I will give you every dollar of it if you will only let me go."

The fellow laughed at that.

"That sounds pretty, too," he said, "but it can't be worked."

"I mean what I say. I will pay you any amount you demand, if I have the money to pay it—"

"Don't say any more, please. You haven't the money, and you can't have it for two or three years yet, unless you marry. If you marry, the man you marry will come in for it and I must be that man."

"Never!"

Just then many heavy steps were heard below, and the two men looked at each other, their faces paling.

"What does that mean?" cried Jake.

"I don't know," Gil answered. "Somethin' is wrong."

There came more and more of the steps, and they were mounting the stairs.

Now thoroughly alarmed, the two rascals opened the door and looked out into the hall.

As they did so, the light from the room they were in disclosed the place the intruders were in search of, and they sprang forward at once.

"This way!" a voice called out, and Broadway Billy, revolver in hand, sprang up the few remaining stairs and forward at the door, the others right at his heels.

Billy it was, with fat Skinny, Bronson Pender and half a dozen policemen at his back.

With an oath, Gil Brand tried to close the door, but Billy got his foot in it to prevent that, and the next instant Pender and a policeman had their shoulders against it.

Others were right at hand, and in a moment the door was hurled open, only to disclose the rascals trying to make their escape by a window.

"Hold there!" cried Billy. "If you get out you'll drop dead to the ground, and here's what says so!"

The fellows glanced over their shoulders, and saw the resolute faces of the young detective and those with him, together with the weapons they had in hand, and it made them hesitate.

That settled it.

"Up with your hands," Billy ordered, "or I'll drill you as quick as a Texas ranger can drill a coyote!"

By this time the frightened girl recognized her lover, and with a cry of joy she threw herself into his arms, sobbing.

"Looks like it's all up, Jake," said Gil Brand, in undertone.

"Yes; curse the luck!"

"Hands up!" Billy ordered again. "If you hesitate one second more we'll shoot you down in your tracks!"

Their hands went up.

No sooner done than Billy and one of the officers had handcuffs on them.

"How do you like that?" Billy asked. "That is the end such fellows as you are bound to come to, sooner or later."

"We'll live to fix you fer this," growled Brand.

"Who in blazes are you?" demanded Jake Washers.

"I used to be known as Broadway Billy, and I guess the name will always hang to me," was Billy's response.

"Well, curse you, we'll remember the name, and you will hear from us later, so don't forget that. We will fix you out for this dirty trick."

"That's all right. You are likely to take a vacation first, however."

The officers had them, now, and Billy giving them some directions they took the ruffians off and away.

When they had gone, Billy and the others sat down for a consultation.

It lasted for a considerable time, and ended only when some of the officers returned.

"Leaving the house in their carriage, and the girl still in the room, as though yet a prisoner, Billy, Skinny, and Pender went away."

It was some time later on, when the chief rascal, the so-called parson, and his wife, made their appearance at the house where they supposed the girl to be in the power of their tools.

They were partly in disguise, the man having laid off his shiny silk hat for a slouch one, and the woman having a shawl over head and shoulders. They came in a cab, and ordered it to wait for them. They were met at the door by Burke Wedger, who at once conducted them above.

When they entered the room Green demanded: "Well, where's the girl? How does she feel about it by this time?"

"Before we talk about that," said Wedger, "I want to talk a little business to you."

"Business to me! What do you mean, sir?"

"Well, I means business, I reckon."

"Out with it, then."

"We have come to the 'clusion that we ain't gettin' enough fer our share in this nasty work."

"The deuce you have! You will get no more than I agreed to pay, you can be sure of that. Where is the girl, I demand?"

"Well, she ain't here, and you won't see her till you come down with an extra five hundred. Oh! we mean it, so you needn't turn so blue around ther gills."

The "parson" was turning blue indeed.

He ripped out a mighty oath, and paced the floor like a raving beast.

"Curses on you!" he cried. "You have played me false! You have let that girl get away, and all my plans are blocked."

"Oh, no, it ain't half as bad as that," was the calm return. "I know where the gal is, and if you come down with the ducats you shall have her back again all in good order."

"But, where is she, I demand?"

"That's tellin': I know, and that's enough."

"Burke, I ought to shoot you for this trick. I've a notion to do it, too."

"Shoot away if you want to; if you do you won't never find the gal in this world, be sure of that."

"Where is she?"

"Come down, and I'll tell ye. I'll take ye to her, and the plot will go right on as intended."

"I'll give you one hundred more."

"Five or nothin'."

"Then it will be nothing, and if you don't produce that girl in ten minutes I'll turn you over to the police on that old charge."

"Ha, ha! I don't feel a heap afraid of that, Mr. Green. I guess my hand is about as good as yours, now. You will have to come down with the money, or it is no gal."

"But, I did double once, when you said my first offer wasn't big enough."

"That was where I made a mistake. I only asked half enough. Now you will have to come to time or it is no deal."

"Curse you!"

"Oh! you may do that if you want to; that don't hurt any. But it does hurt to shell out the scads, don't it? Come down with them, if you want the gal; and I am of the mind you do."

"How far from here is she?"

"Far enough for safe keepin'."

"I must have her within half an hour, or it will be too late."

"All right; you plank down the money and I'll have her here in that time, or less."

At that moment there came a rap at the door.

The "parson" was standing nearest it, and opened it at once.

A ragged, dirty youth of perhaps eighteen years of age, to judge hastily, entered.

"Say, be you Tomkins Green, mister?" he demanded of the "parson."

"Who are you, and why do you ask that question?" was the counter-question at once.

"I want ter know who I'm talkin' to, 'fore I tell all I know," was the rejoinder. "I was sent here by a fellow what said his name was Howmark, and he told me ter deal with nobody but Mr. Green."

"Well, then, I am Green. Now, what is it?"

"And this other man is Burke Wedger, I take it?"

"Yes, yes. Go on."

"And this is Sally Ann— No, I mean Mary Ann."

"Yes, yes, yes."

"And this other is Mrs. Green—"

"Confound you, yes. Now say what you have to say and be done with it."

"All right. Ye see, Rob said as how I mustn't talk afore any one else, and I wanted to be sure."

"It is all right, then, so now tell us what you have got to tell."

"Well, this Rob he has got on track of the gal, he told me to tell ye, and said for you to foller me and I'd bring ye to the place where she is."

"Thunder!" ejaculated Burke.

"Oh! you ain't in it this time, Mr. Wedger," the youth declared. "You are out altogether now, so Robert said."

"Where is he?" asked Green.

"That's what I'm ter show ye, sir; but Rob said not bring Burke nor Mary Ann, as they was out of it, and they had tried ter dump you fer rotten pertaters but had got left bad. Are ye ready? If ye are, why come right along and we'll trot back soon, fer Rob seemed to be in a sweat about somethin'."

CHAPTER XV.

PREPARING FOR THE LAST ACT.

BURKE WEDGER and his better half were looking at each other in dismay.

Here was something they had not counted on, and they knew not how to understand it.

How had Rob Howmark been able to discover what had been done with the girl? How had he been able to outwit Gil Brand and his wife?

"I want to know all about this thing before I take a step. I want to know all you know, young man, and all you were told to tell me. Where is this young lady, sir?"

"She's at a house on — street—"

"You lie!" cried Burke. "She ain't there at all."

"All right, if you know best; but that's what Rob Howmark told me to say."

"What else did he tell you to say? Come, out with it, for there is scant time now for talk."

"Well, ter sum it all up is a lump, here is what I was told ter tell ye, in case ye pinued me down to it, as ye have done. This man Burke Wedger, he laid a skeem with a pard of his, Gil Brand, ter take the gal away from here and make you pay double. That was what they done, and that's all this man knows about it, so Rob told me to say. But, Gil had another pard, and they took the gal to another place, and they was goin' ter dump this man, Wedger, and deal with you themselves. There, ye have it."

"Curse him!" cried Wedger. "If I find out that's so I'll kill him."

"Well, let's go, at once," said the "parson."

"Your words admit the truth of it, Burke, and you are out of it, indeed. Now you will whistle for your money. You made a fool of yourself."

"We'll see how much of a fool I made of myself. I don't believe this yarn, and I'm goin' ter see Gil Brand myself. If I find this is false, I'll make you pony up a clean thousand."

"The story speaks for its own truth," retorted the "parson." "I am going to get the girl now."

The ragged young man had already backed out of the room, and now Green and his wife followed, closing the door after them.

"Is that your cab down by the door?" the guide asked.

"Yes, and we'll go in that," was the answer.

"That is jest what I was goin' ter say, as it will save time. I kin ride on the top with the driver."

"Yes; and have him hurry up a little, too, for time is precious."

"You bet I will, fer Robert told me ter hump myself."

They left the house, entered the cab, and the ragged guide mounted to the box with the driver and directed him where to go.

Their destination was the place where we last saw the fair prisoner, and where she had been left by Broadway Billy and her lover, in the care of others, seemingly a prisoner still.

A knocking at the door caused it to be opened by an old man with mixed gray hair and beard.

"Wull, what do ye want hyer?" he asked, with a Western twang.

It was no other than Roger the Rover.

"This is the gent and lady what the young man sent fer," answered the ragged youth. "I'll show 'em right up."

"All right; up with 'em!"

Broadway Billy—the reader has guessed it was he, of course;—led the way, and conducted the man and woman to the room where Laura Wardley was.

A knock at the door caused it to be opened by the young man, Robert Howmark, who was now a rather battered-looking gentleman. He had a bandage over one eye, and a red mark was across one cheek.

"What on earth's the matter?" cried Green, at sight of him.

"Nothing, only I almost got killed in rescuing Laura from the hands of a couple of ruffians," was the answer.

"I should think so, by the looks of you. A fine-looking groom you will make now. Well, my young lady," turning to Laura, "what do you think of it now?"

"Oh, Mr. Green!" the girl cried, "I am ready to do anything you want me to do now, only take me out of these horrible holes and let me get back again to Philadelphia."

"Ha! I thought we should bring you to terms. Are you ready to marry Robert, then?"

"Yes, yes; I will do anything."

"Well, now, this is something like!" the delighted rascal cried, rubbing his hands. "I told you how it would be, wife. Now we can go ahead at once. Everything has been arranged for a nice little wedding at our hotel, and you will never regret the step, Laura, dear."

"I begin to see it in that light, sir."

"When she saw me fighting for her," spoke up Robert, "it evidently made her realize that I do care for her, and when I asked her the question she said yes."

"Well, well, that is nice. Now we will all go to the hotel as soon as we can, and there you will find better clothes which you can put on at once."

"I am rather a sad-looking subject for a hotel wedding," said Robert. "Hadn't we better put it off till we get home?"

"Never mind your looks, sir. That can be explained, and as everything has been arranged it will not do to put it off. No; it must take place at ten o'clock."

"Well, sir, I will be there about that hour. I cannot go with you now. I will try and get myself up to look a little better than this, anyhow. You will take Laura with you, of course."

"Certainly. And you mustn't fail us."

"No fear of that; I will be on time to the minute."

The girl had put on her hat and shawl now, and was ready to go with her much beloved guardian.

"Don't forget your promise," reminded Howmark, as she was leaving the room in company with her guardian and his wife.

"I won't," was her answer. "I will marry you now, and so do as Mr. Green has wanted me to do all along. I have been foolish long enough."

She passed out, leaning on the arm of Mrs. Green, her guardian coming after them rubbing his hands in a highly satisfied manner. He had broken the will of this high-strung beauty at last.

Ah, had he?

When they had gone, fat Skinny went out, took another cab, and did not lose sight of them until they were safely lodged in their hotel apartments.

"Sweet pertaters!" cried Broadway Billy, when he had watched them from the window until out of sight, "but this is working fine! What do you think of it, Roger, old boy?"

And without waiting for any response he proceeded to cut a pigeon wing in his old time boyish way.

"I think you have got ther game in a corner, now," was the old ranger's comment.

"Bet your life we have!" Billy cried. "There will be fun before long, now, and you shall be on hand to see it. This is the way we do it in New York."

"And you are a young terror," remarked Robert Howmark, with his bandaged eye and marked cheek.

"That's all right, Robert, old boss!" Billy returned. "You see that you do your part in this business all right, or you may get sent up yet."

They all laughed, and ere long went out, locking up the house after them, or rather the rooms.

In the mean time something had happened at

the other house; that is, the house where Wedger and his wife had had the girl imprisoned.

Only a few minutes after the departure of the "parson" and his worthy consort, and just as Burke was about leaving the room to go in search of Gil Brand, three policemen entered.

The rascal and his wife were filled with consternation at sight of them, and looked for means of escape.

"Don't think you can get away," the foremost officer said. "We have got you, and you are our prisoners."

"What do you arrest us for?" demanded Burke, fiercely.

"You know well enough what for," was the response.

"I demand to know, and I demand to see your warrant, too."

"Well, here is the document, then. You had better come along quietly, or it will be the worse for you."

The warrant was all straight, and was gotten out by Bronson Pender, the charge being that of abduction, and so forth, set forth in full as known to the reader.

A great deal of fuss was made by the rascally pair, but it amounted to nothing with the grim officers, and they were marched off to the station with little ceremony and less politeness.

To return to Billy.

Leaving the house as shown, they repaired at once to Billy's home. There they found some supper awaiting them, of which they had not yet partaken; and they made a hasty disposal of it.

While they were eating, Fatty-Skinny came in, reporting all right regarding the matter he had just been attending to, and now the case was ripe for the final act.

Billy laid off his disguise, dressed himself up in respectable manner once more, taking care to have his new badge under his coat lapel, and finally they all set out from the house.

The man with the bandaged eye and scarred cheek was with them.

Their first business was to visit one of the police stations, where they found a detective costumer awaiting them.

This man was one who was a favorite with detectives, and on whom they frequently called when it was desirable to "make up" in any special manner with great care. He could do anything in his line.

When he had greeted Billy, whom he had known as a boy, he set about the business that was required of him.

A prisoner was brought out, and the man with the bandaged eye removed the bandage and wiped the mark from his cheek.

The first, the prisoner, was the real Robert Howmark, while the latter was no other than Bronson Pender! This the reader has guessed, of course.

The artist set to work, and as the size and general appearance of the men were about the same, his task was not difficult. In half an hour no one, without some suspicion, could have guessed that Bronson Pender was not Robert Howmark.

"You have got a pretty good double, Rob, old boy," remarked Broadway Billy, then.

"And you will have your trouble for your pains," the rascal snarled. "You may think you can fool the old man, but you can't."

"Sweet pertaters! We have fooled him already, without any disguise at all, except your clothes, and it will be funny if we can't do it now. You rest easy on that score, Robby, me gander!"

The prisoner was taken back to his cell, and after a few finishing touches, his double was ready for his part.

His eye was discolored artistically, and the mark was left on his cheek to a certain extent, and no one could have guessed the deception without some knowledge to guide him to the truth of it all.

They were now ready for the denouement, or nearly so.

CHAPTER XV.

WINDING UP THE RASCALLY GAME.

THE next thing on the programme was a visit to the minister whom the rascally Green had engaged to perform the marriage ceremony.

Billy and Bronson Pender went to see him, while fat Skinny and the old ranger went to the hotel, together with two officers, to have an eye upon things there.

To the minister a full disclosure of the matter was made, and he was put in possession of all the facts. His service was still required, and when he had learned all he was willing to go.

"My suspicion has been aroused," he said, "for in looking over a list of the clergymen where this man claims to belong, I have failed to find such a name as Graceaway."

"I guess not," said Billy. "He is about as far away from Grace as a rascal can get. He is a humbug of the first water, but he is going to be brought up with a round turn. Please do not fail us, now, will you?"

"Oh, no; since my presence is necessary to the success of the scheme you have laid, I will be on hand to do my part. It is right I should do so, to make the rascal feel the full weight of vengeance that is his due. The hand of Providence is in this."

"Yes; and so is mine," Billy declared.

They went away, and now their business was at the hotel.

Parting before they reached there, Billy went on ahead and learned that everything was all right.

Finding it so, he reported to Pender, and nothing more remained to be done until the hour of ten rolled around; and it was not far away now.

Meanwhile, in their rooms at the hotel, the Greens had been pushing forward rapid preparations for the carrying out of their infamous scheme. Mrs. Green had brought some of Miss Wardley's best clothes with her, and the young lady was now richly attired, and looked far different from what she had appeared so shortly before.

She had brightened up, too, her eyes were sparkling, and she was like another person.

The rascally pair could not understand it, but had to be satisfied with her explanation that since she had made up her mind to obey them, she felt really happy.

As the hour of ten drew near, Shyster Fudgley put in an appearance, smiling broadly and washing his hands vigorously. He had high expectations which were soon to be dashed to the ground.

He had a paper prepared, which he handed to Green for inspection.

It seemed to be all satisfactory, and the two appeared to take a good deal of quiet satisfaction out of it.

In due time the minister came, and was cordially received.

He tried to act naturally, but it was not easy work, though he did not arouse any suspicion.

Finally came Robert, the proposed bridegroom.

Now he looked more like himself. The bandage had been removed from his eye, the disfigurement looked to have been painted, and the mark on his cheek was only about half as bold as it had been.

He was greeted cordially by Green and his wife, who were smiling, sleek and eminently respectable; and was introduced to the minister and the lawyer.

After some remarks all around, it was suggested that the ceremony had better be performed at once, as the hour was late.

No one was unwilling, and the happy couple stood up to be made one.

Mr. and Mrs. Graceaway stood up with them.

"This is a proud and happy moment for me," the rascally "parson" remarked.

"And for me, too," echoed his wife.

"I am so glad I am going to obey you," remarked the smiling bride.

"We had to be a little cruel only to be kind, my dear," remarked Mrs. Graceaway, with smiles.

The minister began the ceremony, and it was soon noticed that he was proceeding without asking or mentioning names.

No one interrupted him, though the sleek rascal Green noticed it, and it went on until the couple were pronounced man and wife, when he said:

"You did not mention names, I noticed, my brother."

"Really, I could have done so," was the response, "and perhaps should have done so, but a short ceremony was requested, you know. Then, it was not really necessary, for the persons are married as fast as the law can bind them."

"Then we are surely man and wife?" asked the groom.

"Positively," was the assurance.

The groom turned and kissed his smiling bride, who clung fondly to his arms.

Green and wife congratulated them, warmly and heartily, and evidently in all sincerity.

After that the sleek rascal turned to the shyster lawyer.

"Now, Mr. Fudgley," he said, "Mrs. Howmark will sign the paper you have prepared."

"One moment before you proceed to that,"

interrupted the new-made husband. "Let me see the paper, if you please."

"Why, it is all right, Robert," Green assured.

"I don't doubt that, but I desire to see it." The paper was given into his hand, and after a glance at it he folded it and put it in his pocket.

"Why, what are you doing?" demanded the "parson." "Are you crazy?"

"Not exactly crazy, I guess," was the response. "I do not mean to allow my wife to sign such a document as this, however."

Green began to show signs of rising color.

"I want to know what you mean by this?" he demanded. "You know what that paper is, and it was well understood that it was to be signed immediately after the ceremony. She must sign it!"

"She shall not sign it, sir. Do not forget that your guardianship over this lady is at an end, and that she has now a husband to look out for her interest. She has one who intends to do it, too. Perhaps you do not recognize me, fully."

With a sweep of his hand he tore off a wig of curly hair, and a pair of tender whiskers, and there stood—not Robert Howmark, but Bronson Pender!

A quick wiping of his face with a wet rag which he had handy for the purpose, and the change was complete!

Green and his wife had reeled back, both pale and very much dismayed.

"You scoundrel!" cried Pender, then, shaking his finger at the miserable wretch. "You have been outwitted, and your villainous scheme foiled!"

The folding doors between the connecting rooms at that moment rolled open, and into the room stepped Broadway Billy, Fatty-Skinny, the old ranger, and two policemen. At the same moment another man entered from the hall.

The latter was one well known to every detective and almost every policeman in the city.

"Well done, Broadway Billy!" he exclaimed. "You have won my confidence, fully. This thing has been handled about as neatly as anything I ever saw in my life."

Billy could not help blushing as he took the offered hand for a shake.

The pretending "parson" and his wife were too surprised to speak, but stood apart from the others, quaking.

As soon as Billy was done receiving congratulations, he turned upon them, and in a tone of keenest irony and sarcasm gave vent to his feelings.

"Well, Reverend B. Greene Graceaway, and angelic wife, what seems to be the matter? You are not so smiling and full of confidence as you were awhile ago. Is anything wrong?"

Green had been making an effort to regain his self-possession, and now he blurted out:

"What is the meaning of all this anyhow? What is this cheat? I demand some explanation, and at once. This marriage was contracted under a fraud, and it is null and void. It is no marriage at all. Miss Wardley, leave that man's side at once, or I shall remove you forcibly."

"You had better not try it, you scoundrel," warned Pender.

"The marriage, sir, is as binding as it can be made," declared the minister who had performed the ceremony. "It was not contracted under fraud at all, except so far as your part in it was concerned. I had some suspicion of your not being what you pretended, after I left you, and was made aware of the whole vile scheme before I came here. You are a villain with whom the law cannot deal too severely."

Shyster was taking advantage of the moment to sneak out of the room.

"No you don't!" suddenly cried Lieutenant Skinny, and he laid hold upon his collar. "I can take care of you."

And he could. The shyster was a little man, and Skinny's weight anchored him as fast as though he had been taken hold of by a giant.

"That's right, Skinny, hold him fast," ordered Billy. "Not much danger of his getting away, though, with your weight hanging to him. Officer, take charge of the rascal."

The shyster protested, and declared himself innocent of all evil intentions, but he was held on to "just the same."

"And now, Mr. Green, too green to be a 'parson,' let me have one word more with you," Billy remarked. "I have had my eye on you ever since you left your native stamping-ground this morning. I suspected something was wrong when I saw you in the train, and meant to find out something about you. I have got there fine ly. All of the rascals who were with you in the

are in limbo, and you are going there, too. I am the ragged youngster who came to you with that pretty story when you were having it hot with Burke Wedger. That surprises you, does it? Well, you may meet more surprises before you are done with this world of tears and sorrows. This officer has a warrant for you and your innocent-looking partner, and we will now take you in!"

The rogue protested loudly, and made a great fuss, but he was soon silenced. A pair of handcuffs helped to do that.

He and his wife were taken away, together with the shyster lawyer, and the others congratulated the smiling groom and happy bride. It was their desire to return at once to Philadelphia, but they had to remain as witnesses against the rascals.

There was a quiet wedding supper at the hotel, at which Broadway Billy, the old ranger, and fat Skinny, were guests, after which our trio went home to seek some much needed rest. On the following day there was a hearing, and all the villains were held for trial.

True to his word, Broadway Billy gave his mother a full week of his time, after which he and Fatty-Skinny began to prospect for a new location—that is to say, a new business stand. The old place was transferred to Skinny's brother on terms easy for him and satisfactory to the retiring partners, and the latter looked around for a new place in which to start. They were to continue still as partners, but it was understood that Billy was to furnish only the money, or most of it, while Skinny gave his time and experience.

Of course, Billy had other ideas for himself. He was a detective born, and nothing else would suit him. He meant to branch out as a professional as soon as he turned of age, and he had not a great while to wait. In the mean while, he would turn his hand to anything in that line that happened to come in his way.

Long live Broadway Billy!

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- 147 Will Wildfire, the Thoroughbred.
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- 170 A Trump Card; or, Will Wildfire Wins and Loses.
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- 183 The Hidden Hand; or, Will Wildfire's Revenge.
- 187 Fred Halyard, the Life Boat Boy; or, The Smugglers.
- 189 Bob Rockett; or, Driven to the Wall.
- 196 Shadowed; or, Bob Rockett's Fight for Life.
- 206 Dark Paul, the Tiger King.
- 212 Dashing Dave, the Dandy Detective.
- 220 Tom Tanner; or, The Black Sheep of the Flock.
- 225 Sam Charcoal, the Premium Dandy.
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- 242 The Two "Bloods"; or, Shenandoah Bill and His Gang.
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- 78 Deadwood Dick on Deck; or, Calamity Jane's Heroine.
- 77 Deadwood Dick's Last Act; or, Corduroy Charlie.
- 100 Deadwood Dick in Leadville.
- 104 Deadwood Dick's Device; or, The Double Cross Sign.
- 109 Deadwood Dick as Detective.
- 129 Deadwood Dick's Double; or, The Gorgon's Gulch Ghost.
- 138 Deadwood Dick's Home Base; or, Blonde Bill.
- 149 Deadwood Dick's Big Strike; or, A Game of Gold.
- 156 Deadwood Dick of Deadwood; or, The Picked Party.
- 195 Deadwood Dick's Dream; or, The Rivals of the Road.
- 201 Deadwood Dick's Ward; or, The Black Hill's Jezebel.
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- 217 Deadwood Dick's Dead Deal.
- 221 Deadwood Dick's Death Plant.
- 232 Gold-Dust Dick, A Romance of Roughs and Toughs.
- 268 Deadwood Dick's Divide; or, The Spirit of Swamp Lake.
- 268 Deadwood Dick's Death Trail.
- 309 Deadwood Dick's Deal; or, The Gold Brick of Oregon.
- 321 Deadwood Dick's Dozen; or, The Fakir of Phantom Flats.
- 347 Deadwood Dick's Ducats; or, Days in the Diggings.
- 351 Deadwood Dick Sentenced; or, The Terrible Vendetta.
- 362 Deadwood Dick's Claim.
- 405 Deadwood Dick in Dead City.
- 410 Deadwood Dick's Diamonds.
- 421 Deadwood Dick in New York; or, A "Cute Case."
- 430 Deadwood Dick's Dust; or, The Chained Hand.
- 448 Deadwood Dick, Jr.
- 448 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Defiance.
- 458 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Full Hand.
- 459 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Big Round-Up.
- 465 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Racket at Claim 10.
- 471 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Corral; or, Boseman Bill.
- 476 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Dog Detective.
- 481 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Deadwood.
- 491 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Compact.
- 496 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Inheritance.
- 500 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Diggings.
- 508 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Deliverance.
- 515 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Protegee.
- 522 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Three.
- 529 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Danger Ducks.
- 534 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Death Hunt.
- 539 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Texas.
- 544 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in the Wild West Vindictive.
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- 554 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Gotham.
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- 578 Deadwood Dick, Jr., Afloat.
- 584 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Denver.
- 590 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Decree.
- 595 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Beelzebub's Basin.
- 600 Deadwood Dick, Jr., at Coney Island.
- 606 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Leadville Lay.
- 612 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Detroit.
- 618 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Cincinnati.
- 624 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Nevada.
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- 636 Deadwood Dick, Jr., After the Queer.
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